
BEYOND STEREOTYPES: UNDERSTANDING FEMALE CRIMINALITY THROUGH PSYCHOLOGICAL AND CRIMINOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Female criminality has historically been relegated to the margins of criminological inquiry, treated either as an anomaly to be explained away through biological determinism or as a mere footnote to male-centric theories of offending. This paper challenges such reductive approaches by arguing that a comprehensive understanding of female criminality requires the integration of psychological and criminological perspectives that move beyond stereotypes of women as either passive victims or aberrant deviants. Drawing upon a multidisciplinary framework encompassing feminist criminology, trauma-informed psychology, life-course theory, and intersectional analysis, this paper examines the complex pathways through which women enter criminal behavior. The analysis reveals that female offending is predominantly shaped by histories of trauma, mental health challenges, socioeconomic marginalization, and systemic responses that criminalize survival behaviors rather than address their root causes. The paper further critiques the gender-blindness of traditional criminological theories and advocates for gender-responsive approaches that acknowledge the distinct social, psychological, and structural context of women's lives. By synthesizing theoretical developments and empirical findings, this research contributes to a more nuanced and humane understanding of female criminality, one that recognizes women offenders not as stereotypes but as individuals whose criminal behavior emerges from identifiable and often addressable pathways of harm.

Keywords: Female Criminality, Feminist Criminology, Trauma-informed psychology, Gendered pathways, Intersectionality, Gender-Responsive Justice

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Problem of Female Criminality in Criminological Discourse

Criminology, as a discipline, has long been preoccupied with explaining why men commit crime. This is hardly surprising given that men constitute the overwhelming majority of offenders across virtually all jurisdictions and offense categories.¹ Yet the relative scarcity of female offending does not justify the theoretical neglect that has characterized much of criminological history. As Carol Smart observed, the statistical picture of female crime acquires additional significance in any analysis of the theories and practice of female criminality. The question is not merely why women commit fewer crimes than men, but what the nature, causes, and consequences of female criminality reveal about broader patterns of social inequality, psychological distress, and systemic injustice.

The marginalization of female criminality in criminological theory has profound practical implications. Criminal justice systems worldwide remain predominantly designed by and for men, with policies, correctional programs, and sentencing practices that fail to account for the distinct pathways and needs of women offenders.² Between 2000 and 2022, the global female prison population increased by 59%, while male prisoner numbers increased by approximately 22%. This disproportionate growth demands urgent scholarly attention to the factors driving female offending and the adequacy of systemic responses.

1.2 Moving Beyond Stereotypes: The Central Argument

This paper advances the central argument that understanding female criminality requires moving beyond entrenched stereotypes that portray women offenders as either biologically deviant, morally deficient, or passive victims of circumstance. Such stereotypes, deeply embedded in both historical and contemporary criminological thought, obscure the complex interplay of psychological trauma, social marginalization, economic deprivation, and systemic responses that shape women's pathways into crime. A genuinely comprehensive understanding must integrate psychological perspectives on trauma, mental health, and coping mechanisms

¹ HUA (SARA) ZHONG & JUDITH A. RYDER, UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S ANTISOCIAL AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR: *A Global Review*, in *The Cambridge Handbook of the International Psychology of Women* 402–416 (FANNY M. CHEUNG & DIANE F. HALPERN EDS., CAMBRIDGE UNIV. PRESS 2020).

² HILDE TUBEX & NATALIE GATELY, *Women's Pathways into Prison: Cycles of Harm, Women & Crim. Just.* (PUBLISHED ONLINE JULY 14, 2025), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08974454.2025.2532433>

with criminological frameworks that attend to structural inequalities and gendered systems of power.

1.3 Scope and Structure of the paper

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing upon scholarship from criminology, psychology, feminist theory, and sociolegal studies. The analysis is primarily theoretical and synthetic, integrating findings from empirical studies across multiple jurisdictions while attending to the specific contexts of different legal and cultural settings. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the historical and contemporary literature on female criminality; Section 3 outlines the research methodology; Section 4 presents the analysis and discussion; Section 5 summarizes the findings and observations; and Section 6 offers conclusions and recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Historical Foundations: Biological Determinism and Early Theories

The intellectual history of female criminality is inseparable from the broader history of criminological thought, yet it has followed a distinct and often problematic trajectory. The foundational theories of female offending were overwhelmingly biological in orientation, reflecting the positive criminology of the late nineteenth century. Cesare Lombroso, often regarded as the father of criminal anthropology, articulated the most influential early theory in his 1895 work *The Female Offender*, co-authored with Guglielmo Ferrero. Lombroso conceptualized female criminality as an inherent biological tendency, viewing criminal women as atavistic throwbacks- evolutionary anomalies deficient in the supposedly natural feminine attributes of piety, maternity, and weakness.³

Lombroso's framework was deeply gendered and pejorative. He described the female offender as unattractive, possessing masculine physical traits and devoid of feminine emotion. She exhibited "strong passions and intensely erotic tendencies" alongside high intelligence and physical strength traits that, in Lombroso's view, rendered her a dangerous aberration from the

³ MOIRA A. LAW, A LONGITUDINAL FOLLOW-UP OF FEDERALLY SENTENCED WOMEN IN THE COMMUNITY: *Assessing the Predictive Validity of the Dynamic Characteristics of the Community Intervention Scale* (PH.D. DISSERTATION, CARLETON UNIVERSITY, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY).

feminine norm.⁴ The therapeutic implication was stark: rehabilitation would involve sterilization programs to prevent the “breeding” of such criminal types.⁵

W.I Thomas extended this biological orientation toward a more psychological model while retaining its gendered assumptions. Thomas hypothesized that women’s lower crime rates resulted from their socialization to “behave well” and guard their chastity for future “investments”.⁶ Poor women, he suggested, were not driven to crime by necessity but rather longed for it, motivated by a desire for excitement that overwhelmed the repressive urge for security.⁷ This formulation pathologized poverty and women’s response to it, framing criminality as a moral failing rather than a product of structural constraint.

Otto Pollak’s 1950 work *The Criminality of Women* perpetuated the myth of the deceitful and manipulative woman whose physiology was the source of her capacity to deceive. Pollak contended that women’s biological role in sexual reproduction rendered them inherently more deceptive than men—an assertion that, like Lombroso’s theories, rested on speculative biology rather than empirical evidence.

The early theories share several common limitations. First, they were preoccupied with explaining the gender gap in crime rates rather than understanding the etiology of female offending in its own right.⁸ Second, they relied upon biological determinism that pathologized women and ignored social, economic, and psychological factors. Third, they treated women as a homogeneous category, failing to account for differences of race, class, and circumstance. Fourth, they served to justify punitive and often misogynistic responses to women offenders, from sterilization to differential treatment in the criminal justice system.

2.2 Sociological and Clinical models

As criminology theory evolved, sociological and clinical models emerged as alternative frameworks for understanding criminal behavior generally, with implications for female offending. The sociological tradition diagnosed crime as having socio-political foundation encompassing poverty, political oppression, and systemic processing.⁹ Clinical theories, by

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.* at 4.

contrast, emphasized biological, emotional, and intellectual problems of the offender as explanations for antisocial behavior.¹⁰

These two traditions became intertwined in the study of female criminality as “biological inferiority” gave way to analyses of limited economic opportunities.¹¹ The shift reflected a growing recognition that women’s crime rates could not be adequately explained by biology alone; structural constraints and social roles also mattered. Yet sociological theories, like their biological predecessors, often treated women as peripheral to the main story of crime, which remained predominantly male.

2.3 The Feminist Critique and the Emergence of Feminist Criminology

The most significant theoretical challenge to traditional approaches emerged from feminist scholarship beginning in the 1970s. Feminist criminologists, including Carol Smart, Meda Chesney-Lind, and Kathleen Daly, fundamentally questioned whether theories developed by men about men could adequately account for women’s experience of crime and criminalization. As Daly and Chesney-Lind observed, both the questions asked and the answers given in criminology have been the “product of white, economically privileged men’s experiences.”

Feminist criminology sought to counter this bias and produce a new, deeper understanding of gender relations in society and how they affect both crime and criminal justice. Prior to Chesney-Lind’s research, most criminologists had simply ignored the study of females in the criminal justice system. Feminist scholars challenged this neglect and argued that gender is not merely a variable to be controlled for but a fundamental organizing principle of social life that shapes offending, victimization, and systemic responses.

The feminist critique identified several key problems with traditional criminology. First, it was “gender-blind,” ignoring women’s activism, research, and feminist theory in favor of what critics termed “malestream” criminology. Second, it failed to recognize that women’s pathways into crime differ fundamentally from men’s, shaped by experiences of sexual and other victimization, the gendered nature of violence, and the effects of patriarchal and capitalist systems.¹² Third, it treated women as a homogeneous category, ignoring the diverse

¹⁰ *Id.* at 4.

¹¹ *Id.* at 4.

¹² *Id.* at 1.

experiences of women across lines of race, class and culture.¹³

2.4 Intersectionality and Contemporary Perspectives

Contemporary scholarship has extended feminist criminology through the lens of intersectionality, recognizing that gender does not operate in isolation but intersects with race, class, sexuality, and other axes of identity and oppression. As one scholar notes, intersectionality explains the different cultural, socialization, labor market situations, and criminal justice experiences of women of color.

Research on intersectionality in criminology examines how gendered racial vulnerability shapes both women's experiences of crime and their criminalization. The concept of "Black Criminology" has emerged as a distinct approach exploring the role of race in shaping women's criminality. Such scholarship reveals that women's pathways into crime are not uniform but are profoundly shaped by their location within intersecting systems of power and disadvantage.

Contemporary perspectives also emphasize the diversity of women's lived experiences and call for theoretical work that specifically considers cultural variations.¹⁴ This recognition has significant implications for both research and policy, suggesting that effective responses to female offending must be tailored to the specific circumstances of different groups of women rather than treating all women offenders as a single category.

2.5 Psychological Perspectives on Female Criminality

Psychological approaches to female criminality have gained increasing attention in recent decades, particularly those emphasizing trauma, mental health, and coping mechanisms. Research consistently demonstrates that women offenders are more likely than male offenders to have experienced trauma and to be diagnosed with conditions such as PTSD and depression.

The relationship between trauma history and offending is often mediated by mental health problems. Women's pathways to crime frequently begin with adverse childhood experiences, including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction-that reverberate throughout their lives, leading to criminal behavior and imprisonment.¹⁵ As one study found, "self-reported pathways

¹³ *Id.* at 1.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 1.

¹⁵ *Supra* Note 2.

included repeated victimization, substance use, psychological trauma, delinquency, and/or crime.”¹⁶

Mental illness carries criminogenic risk throughout the life course, with crucial transitions of risk leading women towards long-term incarceration.¹⁷ The pathways framework, which emphasizes gendered-bases influences on crime and incarceration, has increasingly recognized the role of mental illness in female criminality.¹⁸ Yet studies on female pathways have often minimized or excluded the role of mental illness, suggesting that the framework would benefit from increased recognition of mental health factors.¹⁹

Psychological research also highlights the distinct ways trauma affects girls and women. Girls are more likely to experience PTSD after trauma and have accelerated cortical aging in brain regions responsible for emotional processing. Such findings, underscore the importance of gender-responsive approaches that attend to the specific psychological needs of female offenders.

2.6 Gendered Pathways to Crime

The pathways paradigm has emerged as a central framework for understanding female criminality. This perspective emphasizes that women’s pathways to crime differ from those of male offenders, often resulting from childhood trauma, mental health disorders, domestic violence, economic marginalization, and substance use.²⁰

Research identifies several distinct pathways. One pathway begins with early abuse, leading to internalizing symptom, then drug use, and finally offending. Another pathway is characterized by repeated victimization, substance use, psychological trauma, delinquency, and crime.²¹ A third pathway involves the intersection of mental illness with criminogenic risk throughout the life course.²²

¹⁶ Sarah E. King & Hayden P. Smith, *Reexploring Female Pathways to Incarceration: Assessing the Role of Mental Illness*, 68 Int’l J. Offender Therapy & Compar. Criminology 1438 (2024).

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ Vijay Lakshmi Mishra & Krishna Mohan Malviya, *Causes Leading to Criminal Behavior among Women: An Overview* (Apr. 21, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15256373>.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

The gendered pathways perspective has significant implications for both theory and practice. It suggests that effective interventions must address the root causes of female offending: trauma, mental health, poverty, and abuse rather than simply punishing criminal behavior. It also implies that gender-responsive correctional practices, which began appearing in the 2000s, are essential for meeting the distinct needs of women offenders.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This paper adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary research design that integrates doctrinal legal analysis with theoretical synthesis from criminology, psychology, and feminist studies. The research is primarily theoretical and analytical, synthesizing existing scholarship to develop a comprehensive framework for understanding female criminality. This approach is appropriate given the paper's objectives of tracing theoretical developments, synthesizing interdisciplinary perspectives, and identifying implications for policy and practice.

3.2 Sources of Data

The research draws upon multiple sources of data. Primary sources include foundational texts in criminological theory, including works by Lombroso, Thomas, Pollak, and other early theorists, as well as contemporary scholarship in feminist criminology and psychological criminology. Secondary sources encompass peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and edited volumes from disciplines including criminology, psychology, sociology, and law. Empirical studies include quantitative and qualitative research on female offending trajectories, pathways to crime, mental health and offending, and criminal justice responses to women offenders. Official statistics and reports include data from national crime records bureaus, prison population reports, and international organizations.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis employs a thematic synthesis approach, identifying key themes across the literature and organizing them into a coherent framework. The themes include: (1) historical theories of female criminality; (2) feminist critiques and the emergence of feminist criminology; (3) psychological factors in female offending; (4) gendered pathways to crime; (5) intersectionality and diversity; and (6) criminal justice responses and gender-responsive

approaches. The synthesis integrates insights from multiple disciplines to develop a holistic understanding that moves beyond the limitations of any single theoretical perspective.

3.4 Limitation

This research has several limitations. First, as a primarily theoretical paper, it does not generate new empirical data but synthesizes existing research. Second, the literature reviewed is predominantly from Western Jurisdictions, particularly the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings to other contexts. Third, the paper cannot comprehensively address all aspects of female criminality but focuses on psychological and criminological perspectives as specified in its scope.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Persistence of Stereotypes in Theory and Practice

Despite significant theoretical advances, stereotypes about female offenders persist in both scholarly discourse and criminal justice practice. The historical tendency to explain female criminality through biological determinism or moral pathology has left a lasting legacy. Women offenders continue to be perceived through lenses that either minimize their agency (as passive victims) or exaggerate their deviance (as unnatural monsters). This dualistic framing obscures the complex reality of women's lives and their pathways into crime.

The persistence of stereotypes has practical consequences. Women in the criminal justice system are often judged more harshly than men for violating gender norms, even when their offenses are similar. The criminal justice system treats female offending differentially, punishing women more severely for non-severe status offense compared to their male counterparts. This differential treatment reflects enduring assumptions about proper feminine behavior and the special threat posed by women who deviate from gender norms.

4.2 Trauma as a Central Pathway to Female Offending

The literature consistently identifies trauma as a central factor in women's pathways to crime. Women offenders are disproportionately likely to have experienced physical or sexual abuse, domestic violence, and other forms of victimization. These experiences of trauma do not simply precede offending; they shape its nature, timing, and persistence.

The relationship between trauma and offending is mediated by multiple mechanisms. Trauma contributes to mental health problems, including PTSD, depression, and anxiety, which in turn increase the risk of substance use and offending. Trauma also disrupts attachment relationships, undermines education and coercion. For many women, crime represents a coping strategy; a way of surviving in contexts of profound disadvantage and danger.

The pathways framework illuminates how trauma reverberates throughout the life course. Adverse childhood experiences initiate cascading effects that lead to deprivation, marginalization, and ultimately criminal behavior and imprisonment.²³ These “cycles of harm” are not merely individual but systemic, reflecting failure of social support, mental health care, and economic opportunity.²⁴

4.3 Mental Health and Female Criminality

The relationship between mental health and female criminality is complex and bidirectional. Women in the criminal justice system have high rates of mental health problems, yet mental illness has often been minimized or excluded in studies of female pathways.²⁵ This neglect has significant consequences, as mental illness carries criminogenic risk and shapes women’s trajectories through the criminal justice system.

Research demonstrates that mental health problems are not merely co-occurring with offending but play a causal role in the pathways to crime.²⁶ Self-reported pathways include repeated victimization, substance use, psychological trauma, delinquency, and crime.²⁷ The pathways framework would benefit from increased recognition of the role of mental illness in female criminality.²⁸

The relationship between mental health and offending also has implications for criminal justice responses. Traditional approaches that treat mental health problems as irrelevant to culpability or as aggravating factors in sentencing fail to address the underlying needs of women offenders. Trauma-informed and mental health-informed approaches, by contrast, recognize that addressing mental health problems is essential to reducing recidivism and promoting

²³ *Supra* Note 2.

²⁴ *Supra* Note 2.

²⁵ *Supra* Note 16.

²⁶ *Supra* Note 16.

²⁷ *Supra* Note 16.

²⁸ *Supra* Note 16.

desistance.

4.4 The Intersection of Gender, Race, and Class

An intersectional analysis reveals that women's experiences of criminality and criminalization are shaped not only by gender but a race, class and other axes of identity. Women of color, poor women, and women from marginalized communities face distinct pathways into crime and distinctive experiences within the criminal justice system.

Research on intersectionality in criminology has highlighted how gendered racial vulnerability shapes both offending and criminalization. Women of color are disproportionately policed, prosecuted, and imprisoned, reflecting the intersection of racial and gender bias in the criminal justice system. Economic marginalization compounds these vulnerabilities, as poverty limits access to resources, support, and alternatives to crime.

The intersectional perspective challenges universalizing accounts of female criminality and calls for attention to the specific contexts of different groups of women. Effective responses to female offending must be tailored to address the multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage that shape women's lives.

4.5 The Limitations of Traditional Criminal Justice Responses

Criminal justice systems remain predominantly designed for male offenders, with policies and practices that fail to account for the distinct pathways and needs of women.²⁹ This "gender-blind" approach has several consequences. First, it fails to identify and address the root causes of female offending, including trauma, mental health problems, and economic marginalization. Second, it applies male-oriented risk assessment and programming to women, often with limited effectiveness. Third, it exacerbates the disadvantages faced by women offenders, particularly those who are primary caregivers to children.³⁰

The limitations of traditional responses are evident in the disproportionate growth of the female

²⁹ *Supra* Note 2.

³⁰ CHRISTABEL COLES, ALICE WICKERSHAM, MADISON LANKESTER, DARRICK JOLLIFFE, NIGEL BLACKWOOD & HANNAH DICKSON, *Female Offending Trajectories: A Systematic Review*, 12 J. DEV. LIFE-COURSE CRIMINOLOGY ART. 8 (2026), [HTTPS://LINK.SPRINGER.COM/ARTICLE/10.1007/S40865-026-00295-Y#CITEAS](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40865-026-00295-y#citeas).

prison population.^{31 32} Despite evidence that many women offenders pose low risk to public safety and have complex needs that are better addressed in community settings, criminal justice systems continue to rely on incarceration. This reliance reflects systemic inertia, gender bias, and the failure to develop and implement gender-responsive alternatives.

4.6 The case for Gender-Responsive and Trauma-Informed Approaches

The research reviewed in this paper makes a compelling case for gender-responsive and trauma-informed approaches to female offending. Gender-responsive approaches recognizes that women's pathways to crime differ from men's and the effective intervention must address the specific needs of women offenders.³³ Trauma-informed approaches recognize the centrality of trauma in women's lives and seek to avoid re-traumatization while addressing the underlying cause of offending.³⁴

Gender-responsive and trauma-informed approaches have been shown to improve outcomes for women offenders, reducing recidivism and promoting desistance. They emphasize holistic, integrated services that address mental health, substance use, housing, employment, and relationships. They also recognize the importance of maintaining family connection, particularly for women who are primary caregivers.

The adoption of gender-responsive approaches has been supported by international frameworks, including the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules). These frameworks recognize that women's distinct needs require distinct responses and call for the development of alternatives to incarceration that address the root causes of female offending.

5. FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

The analysis yields several key findings:

First, historical theories of female criminality were predominantly biological and deterministic,

³¹ *Supra* Note 2.

³² *Supra* Note 30.

³³ *Supra* Note 20.

³⁴ *Supra* Note 20.

pathologizing women and ignoring social, economic, and psychological factors. These theories persist in subtle forms in contemporary discourse and practice, shaping perceptions of women offenders and responses to their offending

Second, feminist criminology has fundamentally challenged traditional approaches, arguing that theories developed by men about men cannot adequately account for women's experiences. Feminist scholarship has illuminated the gendered nature of offending, victimization, and criminal justice responses, and has called for attention to the diverse experiences of women across lines of race, class, and culture.

Third, psychological research demonstrates that trauma and mental health problems are central to women's pathways to crime. Women offenders are disproportionately likely to have experienced abuse, violence, and victimization, and suffer from mental health conditions including PTSD and depression. These factors are not merely coincidental but play causal roles in the pathways to offending.

Fourth, the pathways framework provides a useful lens for understanding female criminality, emphasizing the gendered influences on crime and incarceration. Women's pathways typically begin with adverse childhood experiences, leading through deprivation and marginalization to criminal behavior and imprisonment. Mental illness carries criminogenic risk throughout the life course, with crucial transitions leading women toward long-term incarceration.

Fifth, intersectional analysis reveals that women's experiences of criminality and criminalization are shaped by the intersection of gender with race, class, and other axes of identity. Women of color, poor women, and women from marginalized communities face distinctive pathways and distinctive experiences within the criminal justice system.

Sixth, traditional criminal justice responses are inadequate for addressing female offending, reflecting gender-blind assumptions and failing to address root causes. The growth of the female prison population, despite evidence that many women offenders pose low risk and have complex needs, indicates the need for alternative approaches.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The findings have several theoretical implications. First, they suggest that criminological theory must move beyond the preoccupation with explaining the gender gap in crime rates and

attend to the distinct etiologies of female offending. Second, they indicate that psychological factors, particularly trauma and mental health, must be integrated into criminological frameworks. Third, they demonstrate that intersectional analysis is essential for understanding the diversity of women's experiences and avoiding universalizing accounts that obscure differences of race, class, and culture. Fourth, they challenge the gender-blindness of traditional criminology and call for theoretical approaches that are explicitly attentive to gender and its intersections with other forms of inequality.

5.3 Policy Implications

The findings also have significant policy implications. First, they suggest that criminal justice policies should be gender-responsive, recognizing the distinct pathways and needs of women offenders and developing interventions that address these needs. Second, they indicate that trauma-informed approaches are essential for effectively addressing female offending and avoiding re-traumatization. Third, they call for the development of alternatives to incarceration that address the root causes of female offending, trauma, mental health, poverty, and abuse, rather than simply punishing criminal behavior. Fourth, they suggest that early intervention, mental health services, and socioeconomic empowerment strategies are integral to the needs of women who offend.³⁵

5.4 Directions for Future Research

Future research should pursue several directions. First, more empirical research is needed on the pathways to female offending across diverse populations and contexts. Including non-Western jurisdictions. Second, research should examine the effectiveness of gender-responsive and trauma-informed interventions, identifying what works for whom and under what conditions. Third, intersectional analyses should be extended to examine how multiple forms of inequality shape women's experiences of criminality and criminalization. Fourth, research should investigate the experiences of women in the criminal justice system, including the impacts of incarceration on women and their families. Fifth, comparative research across jurisdictions could illuminate how different legal and policy frameworks affect female offending and responses to it.

³⁵ *Supra* Note 20.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Synthesis of the Argument

This paper has argued that understanding female criminality requires moving beyond stereotypes and integrating psychological and criminological perspectives. Historical theories that explained female offending through biological determinism or moral pathology have given way to more sophisticated frameworks that recognize the complex interplay of trauma, mental health, social marginalization, and systemic responses. Feminist criminology has fundamentally challenged traditional approaches, arguing that gender is not merely a variable to be controlled for but a fundamental organizing principle of social life that shapes offending, victimization, and criminal justice responses.

The analysis reveals that female offending is predominantly shaped by histories of trauma and victimization, mental health challenges, and socioeconomic marginalization. Women's pathways into crime typically begin with adverse childhood experiences that reverberate throughout their lives, leading through deprivation and marginalization to criminal behavior and imprisonment. These pathways are not merely individual but systemic, reflecting failure of social support, mental health care, and economic opportunity.

The criminal justice system's responses to female offending remain inadequate, reflecting gender-blind assumptions and failing to address the root causes of women's criminal behavior. The disproportionate growth of the female prison population, despite evidence that many women offenders pose low risk and have complex needs, indicates the urgency of developing and implementing gender-responsive and trauma-informed alternatives.

6.2 The way forward

Moving forward, several priorities emerge. First, criminological theory must continue to evolve beyond its historical biases, integrating psychological perspectives on trauma and mental health with structural analyses of gender, race, and class. Second, criminal justice policies must become genuinely gender-responsive, recognizing the distinct pathways and needs of women offenders and developing interventions that address these needs of women offenders and developing interventions that address these needs. Third, trauma-informed approaches must be embedded throughout the criminal justice system, from policing and prosecution to sentencing

and corrections. Fourth, alternatives to incarceration must be developed and expanded, addressing the root cause of female offending rather than simply punishing criminal behavior. Fifth, research must continue to illuminate the diverse experiences of women offenders and the effectiveness of different responses.

6.3 Concluding Reflections

Female criminality is not a marginal phenomenon but a window into broader patterns of social inequality, psychological distress, and systemic injustice. Understanding why women offend and why the criminal justice system responds as it does reveals much about the nature of gender, power and social control in contemporary societies. Moving beyond stereotypes requires not only theoretical sophistication but also moral commitment: a commitment to seeing women offenders not as stereotypes but as individuals whose criminal behavior emerges from identifiable and often addressable pathways of harm. It requires recognizing that many women in the criminal justice system are themselves victims of abuse, of poverty, of systemic neglect, and the effective responses must address both their offending and the harms they have suffered.

The challenge is significant, but so too is the opportunity. By integrating psychological and criminological perspectives, by attending to the intersections of gender, race, and class and by developing gender-responsive and trauma-informed approaches, we can move towards a more just and effective response to female offending one that reduces harm, promotes dignity and recognizes the full humanity of women offenders.