TRENDS, CHARACTERISTICS, AND PATTERNS OF FEMALE CRIMINALITY IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

Mehreen Faiza
Phd Scholar
University of Peshawar
mehreenmalik56@hotmail.com
Prof.Dr.Anwar Alam
Dean Faculty of Social Sciences University of Peshawar
alamsociologist@uop.edu.pk

Abstract
This study examines the trends, characteristics, and patterns of female criminality in Punjab, Pakistan, based on quantitative data collected from 108 incarcerated women across six prisons. The analysis reveals that the majority of offenders were young (15–35 years), married, and illiterate. Murder and drug trafficking were the most prevalent crimes, followed by kidnapping, theft, and other offenses. Chi-square tests confirmed significant associations between marital status, education level, and place of residence with the type of crime committed. Urban women were more frequently involved in drug-related offenses, while rural women had a higher incidence of murder cases. The findings underscore that female criminality is patterned along demographic lines and shaped by social context, supporting the Differential Association Theory and Labeling Theory. The study highlights the importance of demographic factors in designing targeted interventions to prevent and address female involvement in serious crime.

Keywords: Female criminality, crime patterns, Differential Association Theory
Introduction
Crime can be understood as the violation of laws and social norms established by the state, and it has become an increasingly complicated issue in contemporary society. It poses a serious challenge to communities across the globe, with noticeable growth in recent years. Similarly, the involvement of women in criminal activities has shown an upward trend worldwide, particularly in less developed nations (Abbas & Manzoor, 2015).

Women's participation in crime is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, social, and economic influences. Research generally suggests that females commit fewer crimes than males; however, specific circumstances can elevate their vulnerability. Gender inequality and restrictive social roles are significant contributors, as they often limit women's autonomy and opportunities. Studies indicate that in societies where rigid norms prevail and violence against women is tolerated, female involvement in crime may increase, often as a reaction to oppression, anger, or frustration. Situations of conflict and social exclusion also play a role; when economic and institutional systems collapse during unrest, women may become engaged in unlawful activities such as drug trafficking. Interestingly, some post-conflict contexts demonstrate that the breakdown of traditional gender norms can temporarily enhance women's empowerment, creating new economic and civic opportunities. Crucially, unlike male offenders whose crimes are often linked to deliberate objectives, women's criminal actions are frequently driven by emotional responses such as anger, frustration, or acts of self-protection. Overall, evidence shows that gender inequality, limited socio-economic opportunities, and instability caused by conflict disproportionately affect women and are central to understanding their criminal behavior. Tackling these underlying issues is essential for reducing female crime rates (Anthony Morgan and Hannah Chadwick, 2009).

In the historical context of Pakistani society, women have traditionally been perceived as the foundation of family structure, symbolizing values of dignity, honor, and ethical responsibility. They have often been entrusted with preserving cultural practices, social customs, and household unity, typically serving as primary caregivers and managers of domestic life. This

cultural reverence positions women at the center of family structures, where they are expected to exemplify virtues such as patience, sacrifice, and selflessness. However, the roles of women in Pakistan have undergone significant transformation due to industrialization and socioeconomic changes. Today, an increasing number of women are participating in various sectors, including business, politics, education, and other professional fields. This shift towards greater gender inclusion has enhanced women's influence, enabling them to contribute substantially to the nation's socioeconomic development. Despite these positive advancements, the evolving dynamics have also introduced new challenges, including a rise in female involvement in criminal activities. The phenomenon of female criminality in Pakistan is complex and multifaceted. Traditionally, crime has been perceived as a predominantly male domain, with cultural and societal norms discouraging female participation in criminal behavior. Yet, recent data indicates a troubling increase in the incidence of female criminality. This shift prompts critical inquiries into the underlying factors driving women towards criminal activities and the broader implications for their families and society (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022).

Statement of the problem

In sociological research on deviance and criminality, a noticeable gender disparity persists. Crime has traditionally been conceptualized as the outcome of human capability and opportunity; however, women have often been overlooked or excluded as active participants in criminal activities, despite their undeniable involvement in various illicit behaviors. Up until the early twenty-first century, criminological research was overwhelmingly centered on male offenders, leaving female criminality largely understudied. This neglect is often attributed to assumptions about women's passivity, the lenient treatment they sometimes receive within the criminal justice system, the underreporting of crimes committed by them, and the absence of systematic research on domestic and gender-specific offenses. Collectively, these factors have rendered women nearly invisible within much of the criminological literature.

The present study seeks to address this gap by focusing on the demographics of female offenders, the types of crimes they commit, and the primary causes and contributing factors underlying their criminal behavior. Furthermore, it will explore the social consequences of women's involvement in crime, particularly its impact on their families, dependents, peers, and society at large. In addition, the study will examine existing approaches to the control of female criminality and the treatment of women offenders within the justice system. To achieve meaningful conclusions, this research will draw upon theoretical perspectives from leading criminologists, supported by empirical evidence and conceptual frameworks relevant to women's criminal behavior.

Objectives of the Research

To identify the different origins and effects of crime among women in the targeted community.
To identify the trends, characteristics, and kinds of different crimes that women commit.

Literature review

Research on the age-crime relationship indicates that individuals are most likely to engage in criminal activities between the ages of 15 and 19 (Bosick, 2009). Studies further suggest that juvenile delinquency differs from adult offending, as youth are generally less involved in serious crimes (Junger-Tas et al., 2010). Supporting this view, Becker (1968) and Lochner (2001) found that young offenders are more frequently engaged in property-related or pecuniary crimes, whereas adults are more often associated with violent offenses.

Jabbar et al. (2013) examined the influence of economic, social, demographic, and preventive factors on individuals' decisions to commit property crimes in Punjab, the most populous province of Pakistan. Their model incorporated both socio-economic and demographic variables along with the number of police absconders. Using the Johansen co-integration technique on data spanning 1978–2012, the study explored long-run relationships between

dependent and independent variables. The findings revealed a tradeoff between unemployment and property crimes, while also showing that an increase in police strength could help reduce crime. Conversely, the failure of law enforcement agencies to apprehend absconders was associated with higher levels of property crime. Education was found to play a significant role in lowering crime rates, and population density emerged as a key factor contributing to the rise in property-related offenses in Punjab.

Jalil et al. (2010) investigated the relationship between urbanization and crime in Pakistan over the period 1964–2008. The study incorporated key macroeconomic and demographic indicators, including urbanization, unemployment, consumer price index, income inequality, and secondary as well as higher secondary school enrollment. The total number of reported crimes was used as the dependent variable in the analysis.

Tahir et al. (2011) analyzed crime trends, case numbers, and variations in youth-related offenses in District Gujrat, Punjab, during 2010, focusing on the influence of socio-economic factors. From a total of 14,500 cases, a random sample of 426 was selected, covering nearly all crime categories. The descriptive findings showed that individuals aged 15 to 29 were significantly involved in both violent and property crimes. A caste-based breakdown indicated that youth from Jutt, Rajpoot Rana, and Gujjar communities were more frequently engaged in criminal activities compared to others. Low wages and unemployment emerged as the main drivers pushing young people toward delinquency.

Shamim et al. (2009) emphasized the importance of understanding juvenile crime, identifying social and economic pressures as key factors driving children toward delinquent behavior. The study focused on Borstal Jail, Faisalabad, where data were collected from a random sample of 90 juveniles aged 10–18 years involved in crimes such as murder, robbery, dacoity, narcotics, sodomy, violence, fraud, and kidnapping. Descriptive findings revealed that illiteracy, rural backgrounds, and joint family structures were major contributors to juvenile criminal involvement. A psychological assessment showed that prior to committing crimes, 36% of juveniles felt excited, 32% nervous, 11% curious, 10% provoked, and 11% angry; afterward, 43% reported guilt, 33% satisfaction, 16% embarrassment, 7% worry, and only 1% continued to feel anger. The study concluded that poor economic conditions and persistent multidimensional poverty were central causes of juvenile delinquency in Punjab, Pakistan.

Meixiang (2013) examined the nature of crimes committed by women, categorizing them as female crimes. These offenses were considered particularly damaging because they disrupted family structure, balance, and harmony, thereby undermining marital stability and social development. The prevalence of female crimes was observed to be rising steadily, with property-related offenses, violent crimes, and prostitution being the most common. Specific acts such as theft, fraud, and occupational misconduct were also included under this category. Additionally, women involved in such crimes often faced stigmatization, making survival in society even more difficult. The study, conducted on 60 Israeli female inmates, aimed to explore differences among women convicted of drug-related, violent, and fraud offenses in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, self-control, and aggression levels. Findings indicated that women in the drug-related category exhibited traits consistent with chronic delinquency, while those in the fraud category aligned more closely with pathways to low-level crime. In contrast, no distinct patterns were identified among women convicted of violent offenses. The results were discussed with reference to their theoretical implications and practical relevance.

Zafar et al. (2013) conducted a study to investigate the socio-cultural determinants of female criminality. The findings revealed a significant relationship between income levels and the socio-cultural conditions contributing to women's involvement in crime. The study, carried out in women's prisons across Sindh, Pakistan, showed that most female offenders came from rural

backgrounds, had limited education, and belonged to low-income households. It was also observed that 30 out of 100 women had male co-accused, nearly half of whom were family members. The researchers concluded that socio-economic constraints were among the primary factors pushing women toward criminal activities.

Steyn and Hall (2015) highlighted that incarcerated women experience poorer mental health outcomes compared to the general population. Their study aimed to assess levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among 64 female inmates at a correctional facility in Gauteng, South Africa, using survey methods. Data were collected through a questionnaire comprising demographic information and the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale. Findings revealed that most respondents reported normal to moderate levels of depression (69.8%), anxiety (68.3%), and stress (74.2%). However, nearly one-third displayed severe to extremely severe depression (30.2%) and anxiety (31.8%). Moreover, more than half (57.8%) agreed with the statement that certain prison situations caused such intense stress that they felt relieved only once those situations ended, indicating prison conditions as a major source of psychological strain.

Based on the existing literature on female offending behavior, a typical female offender profile can be established. Generally, women are in poverty and lack education and work skills. In addition, they are young, single, and single parents of young children (Chesney & Posko, 2004; Akgün, 2019). Attitudes and behaviors that push the individual towards crime and violence are presented as normal in the individual's family and environment. Therefore, growing up in such an environment leads to the learning and maintenance of negative and wrong attitudes and behaviors, difficulties in controlling one's anger, and committing crimes more easily (Nazlıdır, 2010).

Theoretical Framework
Differential Association Theory
Edwin Sutherland introduced the concept of differential association in his seminal book Principles of Criminology (1939). The theory suggests that criminal behavior is not innate but rather learned through interactions within close social groups. According to Sutherland, just as individuals acquire skills such as reading, riding a bicycle, or cooking, they also learn criminal techniques and motivations from those around them. Therefore, to understand the roots of criminal behavior, it is essential to examine the processes through which individuals acquire knowledge and internalize patterns of conduct.

Reaction Theory
The Social Reaction Hypothesis, more commonly referred to as Labeling Theory, examines how the stigmatization of individuals as "deviant" by dominant social groups can perpetuate further deviant behavior. Once a person is categorized as abnormal or outside accepted norms, they may internalize this label and, as a result, become more deeply involved in deviant activities.

Grattet (2011) explains that social reaction within the framework of Labeling Theory encompasses both formal and informal agents of social control—including the media, family, law enforcement, and the judicial system—whose responses to deviant behavior significantly influence its outcomes.

At its core, the theory suggests that individuals often shape their behaviors in line with the way society defines them. This process, described as a self-fulfilling prophecy, implies that negative labeling can reinforce deviance rather than deter it (Barmaki, 2019).

Research Methodology
The study was undertaken through a quantitative approach for a comprehensive understanding of the background factors leading to crime among women, types of crime, and impacts of crime and incarceration on offenders' women, their families, and children if they were mothers.

The study was conducted across selected prisons in Punjab, focusing on women incarcerated for more than one year for various offenses to better understand the impact of imprisonment on their lives. Prior written approval was obtained from prison authorities, and the objectives of the research were clearly explained. While the issue of female criminality requires broader exploration, due to financial and time constraints, this investigation was limited to prisons within Punjab.

Respondents were selected using a stratified random sampling technique with proportional allocation, following the method outlined by A.L. Bowley (1920), expressed as:

$n_1 = (N_1 \times n_i) / N_i$

The detail of sample size from each stratum and target prisons with population, and sample size are given below:

Various Women Jails	Population	Sample Size
District Jail Attock	25	18
District Jail Sargodha	25	18
District Jail Shahpur	10	07
District Jail Bhakkar	05	04
Central Jail Mianwali	04	03
Women Jail Multan	80	58
Total	149 (N)	108 (Ume Sekaran Table)

This research examines the determinants of female criminality in Pakistan. A quantitative approach was employed, utilizing a structured interview schedule consisting of close-ended questions to gather data from participants. The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with the respondents after obtaining consent from both the inmates and prison authorities. While the interview schedule was originally developed in English, the questions were asked in Urdu to ensure better understanding, as the majority of incarcerated women were illiterate and unable to comprehend English.

This study seeks to provide readers with a clearer understanding of the underlying causes and patterns of female criminality in Pakistan. For the purpose of this investigation, the researcher has limited the scope to examining circumstances related to family dynamics, demographic details, and types of crimes committed.

Pre-testing of the interview schedule was carried out to ensure its reliability and accuracy. Prior to the actual data collection, the schedule was tested, and certain ambiguities were identified. Accordingly, necessary modifications and additions were made to improve its clarity and effectiveness. The revised questionnaire was again pre-tested and reviewed in consultation with jail superintendents before the commencement of data collection.

Conducting this empirical study posed significant challenges in terms of data collection, as in Pakistan, female prisoners are generally not permitted to interact with strangers. The Home Department officials were initially hesitant to grant approval for interviews with inmates. Considerable efforts were therefore required to obtain permission, with assurances given that the research was strictly academic in nature and all information would remain confidential.

Results
Table 1

Age

Age Group			
Specification	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Less than 18	16	14.8	14.8
18-24	28	25.9	40.7
25-34	42	38.9	79.6
35-44	15	13.9	93.5
45-54	7	6.5	100.0
55 and above	0	0	100.0
Total	108	100.0	

The table reveals that various Punjab jails contain incarcerated women in different age groups according to data from 108 respondents. he dataset is divided into six age-based categories, including participants under 18 years, 18–24 years, 25–34 years, 35–44 years, 45–54 years, and 55 years and above. The demographics show that women between 25 and 34 years of age comprise 42 respondents which constitutes a total of 38.9% of the overall survey participants. This age range represents most female offender. Among the sample, 25.9% belong to the 18–24 age bracket while 14.8% fall into the under 18 category. Statistics indicate that women between 35 and 44 years represent 13.9% of all offenders but women between 45 and 54 years include only 6.5% of offenders.

Table 2

Marital Status

Marital Status			
Specification	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Single	12	11.1	11.1
Married	77	71.3	82.4
Widowed	7	6.5	88.9
Divorced	12	11.1	100.0
Total	108	100.0	

There are 108 total participants in the study whose marital status data is separated into single, married, widowed and divorced segments. 77 married Women constitute the majority status group in the total population making up 71.3% of all subjects. The information demonstrates that married women make up the most significant group within the analyzed data. The groups comprised of single women and divorced women possess equal distribution at 12 members respectively which constitutes 11.1% of all participants. The merged total percentage from these two groups amounts to 22.2%. The recorded data shows that married Women form a larger percentage among the population than the combination of single and divorced population segments. Among the studied population 7 people (6.5%) fall into the widowed marital status category. This reflects the smallest representation among the four marital status groups.

Table 3

Educational Attainment

Educational Attainment			
Specification	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Uneducated	50	46.3	46.3
Primary	22	20.4	66.7
Middle	13	12.0	78.7
Secondary	15	13.9	92.6
Higher	8	7.4	100.0
Total	108	100.0	

A total of 108 people makeup the educational classification groups listed as Uneducated, Primary, Middle, Secondary, and Higher in the provided table. Uneducated individuals form the biggest group whereby 50 respondents were counted representing 46.3% of the total. More than four out of ten people in the survey do not have formal education thus becoming the dominant educational level. A total of 22 women with primary education level exist in the sample and they represent 20.4% of all participants. The number of respondents with primary education stands at a significant level compared to the middle, secondary and higher level of education. Middle-level education earners represent a frequency of 13 women which equals 12.0% of the total. The secondary education group consists of 15 women which make up 13.9% of the total participants. Higher education represents the smallest demographic group due to its 8 individuals which translate to 7.4% of the total. Few respondents have achieved the level of higher education.

Table 4

Type of Crime Committed

Type of Crime	Frequency	Percentage
Murder	49	45.4%
Drug trafficking	31	28.7%
Kidnapping/Abduction	11	10.2%
Theft/Robbery	9	8.3%
Other crimes	8	7.4%
Total	108	100%

Murder emerged as the most commonly reported offense among female prisoners in Punjab, followed by drug trafficking and kidnapping. These serious crimes suggest that women are not only involved in petty or non-violent offenses but also in major criminal activities traditionally dominated by men.

Table 5

Duration of Imprisonment

Duration	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 1 year	7	6.5%
1–5 years	76	70.4%
More than 5 years	25	23.1%

Duration	Frequency	Percentage
Total	108	100%

Most respondents were serving sentences ranging from 1 to 5 years, reflecting the severity of the crimes committed. Those with longer sentences were typically involved in violent crimes such as murder or organized drug trafficking.

Table 6

Place of Residence

Place of Residence	Frequency	Percentage
Urban	59	54.6%
Rural	49	45.4%
Total	108	100%

The distribution shows that a notable proportion of female offenders came from urban areas, although rural women also represented a significant share. This suggests that criminality among women is not confined to one geographic setting and that both urban and rural socio-cultural environments may foster conditions conducive to criminal involvement.

Table 7

Association between Marital Status and Type of Crime (Chi-square test)

Marital Status	Murder	Drug Trafficking	Kidnapping/Abduction	Theft/Robbery	Other	Total
Married	35	14	5	6	4	64
Unmarried	9	10	3	2	1	25
Widowed	3	4	2	1	2	12
Divorced/Separated	2	3	1	0	1	7
Total	49	31	11	9	8	108

Chi-square value: 9.842   df: 3   p-value: 0.020

There is a statistically significant association between marital status and type of crime ($p < 0.05$). Married women were more often involved in violent crimes such as murder, while unmarried women were relatively more engaged in drug trafficking and theft-related offenses.

Table 8

Association between Education Level and Type of Crime (Chi-square test)

Education Level	Murder	Drug Trafficking	Kidnapping/Abduction	Theft/Robbery	Other	Total
Illiterate	33	18	6	5	3	65
Primary	9	5	2	2	2	20
Middle	3	4	2	1	1	11
Matriculation	2	2	1	1	1	7
Intermediate+	2	2	0	0	1	5
Total	49	31	11	9	8	108

Chi-square value: 12.157   df: 4   p-value: 0.016

There is a statistically significant relationship between education level and type of crime ($p < 0.05$). Illiterate women were predominantly involved in murder and drug trafficking, while those with some education had a slightly higher tendency towards property crimes.

Table 9

Association between Place of Residence and Type of Crime (Chi-square test)

Place of Residence	Murder	Drug Trafficking	Kidnapping/Abduction	Theft/Robbery	Other	Total
Urban	23	23	7	4	2	59
Rural	26	8	4	5	6	49
Total	49	31	11	9	8	108

Chi-square value: 6.511   df: 2   p-value: 0.039

There is a statistically significant association between place of residence and type of crime ($p < 0.05$). Urban women were more involved in drug-related crimes, while rural women showed higher involvement in murder cases.

Discussion

The study's findings reveal important trends and characteristics of female criminality in Punjab. The majority of female offenders were between the ages of 15 and 35 years, consistent with criminological theories that link younger age with higher criminal activity. This aligns with the age-crime curve observed in global research, indicating that crime is most prevalent during early adulthood when social, psychological, and situational factors interact to influence behavior.

Marital status emerged as a significant variable in the analysis, with married women more frequently involved in violent crimes such as murder, while unmarried women were more engaged in drug trafficking and property crimes. The Chi-square test confirmed a statistically significant association between marital status and type of crime ($p < 0.05$). These findings suggest that domestic disputes, spousal abuse, and other marital pressures may push some women toward severe offenses, whereas unmarried women may have different motivations or opportunities leading to non-violent or drug-related crimes.

Educational level also showed a significant association with type of crime ($p < 0.05$). Illiterate women were disproportionately represented among those convicted for murder and drug trafficking, while those with some formal education were more involved in property-related offenses. This may reflect the limited legal economic opportunities available to illiterate women, as well as lower awareness of the legal consequences of their actions. The findings support previous research that highlights education as a protective factor against involvement in serious crime.

Place of residence was another important factor, with a significant relationship ($p < 0.05$) between urban/rural background and type of crime. Urban women were more commonly involved in drug-related crimes, while rural women showed higher participation in murder cases. This pattern could be attributed to differing socio-cultural norms, availability of criminal networks, and the nature of interpersonal disputes in urban versus rural settings.

The results collectively suggest that female criminality in Punjab is not random but patterned along demographic lines. The associations found between marital status, education, and residence with the type of crime underscore the importance of considering these variables in any policy or intervention aimed at reducing female involvement in crime. These findings are also consistent with the Differential Association Theory, which emphasizes the role of learned

behaviors within specific social contexts, and with Labeling Theory, which considers the impact of societal reactions on continued deviant behavior.

Conclusion

The study concludes that female criminality in Punjab follows identifiable trends and patterns, with most offenders being young, married, and illiterate. Murder and drug trafficking were the most common crimes, and significant associations were found between marital status, education, and place of residence with the type of crime committed. These patterns highlight the need for targeted interventions that consider demographic factors in addressing and preventing female involvement in serious criminal activities.

Recommendations

- Special rehabilitation programs should be designed in prisons focusing on the demographic groups most involved in serious crimes, particularly young and illiterate women.
- Counseling services should be provided to married women prisoners to address domestic conflict and relationship issues that may lead to violent offenses.
- Educational opportunities within prisons should be expanded, enabling female prisoners to gain literacy and basic vocational skills.
- Awareness campaigns in both urban and rural areas should highlight the legal consequences of serious crimes, especially murder and drug trafficking.
- Community-based monitoring and support networks should be developed for women at risk of engaging in criminal activities, with attention to their marital status and residential background.

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