



Knowledge Brief

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Gendered Pathways to Crime

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The principle that laws should apply equally to all, regardless of financial status, social standing, religion, race, or caste, is widely accepted (Clear, 2009). However, the question remains whether the formulation, design, and implementation of laws should account for markers of exclusion and marginalization, such as gender (Bloom et al., 2003). The literature on Gendered Pathways Theory (GPT) addresses this issue, arguing that while criminal acts may be gender-neutral, the pathways leading to these acts are distinctly gendered (Daly, 1992). Ignoring the gendered nature of these pathways—encompassing the motivations, commission, and consequences of crime—can lead to ineffective policies and flawed conclusions in criminological research (Reisig et al., 2006).

How are Pathways to Crime, Gendered?

Marginalization and exclusion are rarely the result of a single factor; rather, they stem from multiple intersecting variables, which include religion, race, their status socially, and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). Women experience these factors differently from men due to their gendered identity, which places them at a structural disadvantage from birth (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013). Societal norms impose distinct expectations and restrictions on women, rooted in the normative foundations of the society in which they live (Belknap, 2007). These norms are transmitted through the family, the primary social unit, which enforces compliance to avoid societal reproach (Morash & Schram, 2002). Consequently, women's lived experiences—whether in familial, social, or public settings—differ fundamentally from those of men, shaping their interactions in spaces such as classrooms, ceremonies, or public events (Richie, 1996).

The effects of gender are compounded by other markers of marginalization, such as economic status, social standing, educational attainment, and ethnic background (Collins, 2000). As Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality suggests, these overlapping factors amplify marginalization. For instance, post-disaster rehabilitation literature indicates that marginalized groups—such as women, children, and the disabled—face more severe consequences following a calamity due to their pre-existing socioeconomic or political disadvantages (Enarson, 2000). This intersectional lens highlights why the pathways towards committing a crime could be different fundamentally for women, from those of men, even when committing similar offenses (Broidy & Agnew, 1997).

Women's gendered identity, assigned at birth, shapes their societal roles and expectations (Chesney-Lind, 2006). For example, cultural norms may dictate that a wife should not challenge her husband, yet when a woman asserts her opinion, she may face persistent abuse—methodical and enduring, as noted in GPT literature (Richie, 2012). This abuse can push women toward extreme actions, including violent crimes (DeHart, 2008). Similarly, poverty affects women differently due to intersecting factors such as gender, low socioeconomic status, or caste (Bloom et al., 2004). A woman from a marginalized background may struggle to secure a livelihood, increasing her vulnerability to criminal pathways (Owen & Bloom, 1995).

Critics of GPT may argue that men also turn to crime due to poverty or trauma (Sampson & Laub, 1993). However, a deeper analysis reveals that women experience these adversities differently (Giordano et al., 2002). For instance, a divorced woman in a society that stigmatizes divorce may face discrimination in employment, earning lower wages or facing exploitation (Reisig et al., 2006). If confronted with a crisis, such as a child's illness, her limited access to resources—unlike men, who may secure loans or lack similar stigma—may lead her to crime (Ferraro & Moe, 2003). This supports GPT's assertion that pathways to crime are gendered (Daly, 1994).

Gendered Pathways to Crime: Key Themes

The GPT framework, notably advanced by Daly (1992, 1994), identifies four primary pathways to crime for women, derived from secondary data such as case files and court proceedings. These pathways are not mutually exclusive but often intersect, reinforcing one another:

1. Childhood Trauma, Abuse, and Neglect:

Empirical studies confirm that girls who experience physical, verbal, or sexual abuse are more likely to become offenders than those who do not (Widom, 1989). This pathway is gendered because girls face more intense and prolonged abuse compared to boys, and boys who experience abuse are statistically less likely to offend (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2014). Childhood trauma can lead to behavioral issues, substance abuse, or running away from home, increasing vulnerability to recruitment by criminal organizations or prostitution rings (McClanahan et al., 1999).

2. Drug Abuse and Misuse:

Studies highlight that the chances for women to get engage in substance abuse are more than men due to their mental health conditions and emotional problems that stem from trauma, exploitation, or intimate partner violence (Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009). Drug abuse not just acts as a crime, but it can become a pathway towards further criminal activity, as women may commit offenses to fund their addiction (Leverentz, 2014). This gendered nature of this pathway lies in the distinct experiences of marginalization and trauma for women as compared to their male counterparts (Covington, 2008).

3. Violence from intimate Partners:

Experiencing violence from abusive spouse or partner is a prevalent pathway, leading to psychological stress that may result in violent acts, such as harming the abuser, or indirect pathways like substance abuse (Richie, 2012). The power dynamics in abusive relationships, where violence reinforces dominance, exacerbate women's vulnerability to crime (DeHart, 2008).

4. Sex Work:

Sex work, often criminalized, is both a pathway to and a consequence of criminal behavior (Farley & Barkan, 1998). Social stigma and lack of legal protections marginalize sex workers, increasing their involvement in crimes such as drug trafficking to sustain themselves or their addiction (Maher, 1997). The political economy of sex work often leaves women with few alternatives, compelling them into this pathway (Rosen & Venkatesh, 2008).

Gaps in Literature

While GPT is well-supported by theoretical and empirical studies, much of the research is rooted in Western contexts, limiting its applicability to non-Western societies such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, or the Middle East. Context-specific studies are needed to analyze gendered pathways in diverse sociocultural settings, ensuring that policies are relevant and effective (Zafar et al., 2013). For instance, as the GPT literature has identified these four common pathways, one must be aware that these patterns have emerged from studies that have been conducted in the west or by western authors. There are few studies catering to Africa and Asia especially from the pathways lens. It has been well established in feminist literature that problems faced by white women are different from those faced by black women in the same societies. And therefore, the problems and issues of the women and marginalized groups in the global south become different as they are in the global North.

Extending this analysis to the realm of crime would lead to interesting findings about how pathways are gendered differently in global south compared to the global north. What role does colonial legacy play in gendering of the pathways to crime and how do colonial institutions and the CJS (Criminal Justice System) designed by the colonialists, for certain specific purposes further complicate the issues for women offenders or alleged offenders. Studies along these lines would fill a significant gap not only in GPT but to the overall knowledge being produced on feminist criminology.

Relevance to the Criminal Justice System (CJS)

The CJS typically adopts a gender-neutral approach, focusing on the criminal act rather than its causes (Bloom et al., 2003). This overlooks the gendered pathways to crime, potentially leading to harsher sentences for women, which can have long-term societal impacts, particularly on families and children (Chesney-Lind, 2006). GPT does not advocate for leniency based on gender but emphasizes that understanding gendered pathways can inform interventions to reduce female offending (Van Voorhis et al., 2010).

In contexts like Pakistan, where the CJS is often influenced by colonial legacies and systemic issues—such as police corruption, as noted in Transparency International reports (Chêne, 2008)—women face compounded disadvantages. For instance, women may be coerced into false confessions under threats that exploit cultural taboos, such as public humiliation (Khalid & Khan, 2013). A gender-sensitized CJS is essential, including women-only police divisions, female officers handling women's cases, and gender-aware prosecution and judiciary practices (Khalid & Khan, 2013). Revising punishments to account for gendered pathways could reduce recidivism, create a safer environment for women, and promote equity in both criminal and civil litigation.

In the case of Pakistan, not only is the CJS incapable of understanding and adopting a gendered sensitive approach but scholarly and scientific contribution from the academia and research community are lacking. Such scholarly input is important because of certain norms and traditions that the country has sometimes translate to gender oppression. For instance, a respondent for one of our research projects shared that she confessed to a murder she had not committed because at the police station the S.H.O and the investigation officer threatened that she would be stripped naked in-front of the entire police station. She was threatened with rape and humiliated and so she confessed. If we had a CJS that recognized that Gender is an important variable, an innocent women wouldn't have to confess to a crime she did not commit. There are many more cases that we have documented in our ongoing research on the subject.

Critique on the GPT

While GPT points to a an important aspect of crime, criminality and provides valuable contribution to felid of Feminist criminology both in theory and practice, yet there also exists a resistance to GPT approaches from some scholars and practitioners. For instance, certain studies posit that the GPT perspective is primarily informed by research that has taken place in the context of United States and then GPT scholars have unfairly applied to other locales without taking into account the contextual realities (Belknap, 2015; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013; Reisig et al., 2006). Another critique is on the nature of crime itself: is the gender sole explanatory variable for women involved in violent crimes? And childhood trauma or drug/substance abuse reason enough to disregard the nature or intensity of the crime and therefore , the court should treat it differently? (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009).

We believe that GPT approaches are often times misunderstood by critics. GPT doesn't argue that women should be treated differently for the same crime and given a lenient sentence compared to their male counterparts. Neither does it advocates or justifies violent crimes by women based on the child hood trauma or other pathways. It simply states that the pathways to crime are gendered. Women may lead themselves into a life of crime but the their pathway could be and often is different than their male counterparts. Understanding this would allow to block those pathways for example, if a woman is able to report domestic violence and is not constrained by cultural or institutional factors, she would be able to get justice and thus something that could have become a pathway to crime is stopped.

Similarly, many women especially in South Asian families are culturally required to be by their husband's side even if they know that they are taking part in a crime. For instance, it is very hard for a woman in South Asian societies to refuse order or command of the husband. One of our respondent for research project stated earlier, had to accompany her husband while her husband and his friend were smuggling drugs. The question is could she have said no? in a South Asian family setting the cultural and societal pressure doesn't give her the space because of her gender.

There are many other cases and accounts that point to the importance of gender. Therefore, we believe that while context matters and the critique that GPT studies primarily originate from US, it doesn't mean that they are irrelevant for other societies. The critique is valid only up to the point where it argues that may be the Gendered pathways to crime are "gendered differently in different social context.

Conclusion

Gendered Pathways Theory discusses and highlights the pathways that take women into crime, such as trauma, abuse, socioeconomic marginalization, and cultural norms. Appreciating that pathways to crime are gendered will help criminological research and criminal justice systems move beyond gender-neutral assumptions toward more effective, equitable interventions. This is especially pertinent in contexts like Pakistan, where colonial legacies, systemic biases, and societal pressures exacerbate women's vulnerabilities, often leading to coerced confessions or overlooked pathways to offending.

GPT is met with resistance on two main fronts contextual relevance to other parts of the world and focus on Gender leading to undermining the nature of the crime however the theory's core argument remains robust: pathways to crime are gendered, and understanding this does not justify leniency but enables proactive measures to disrupt harmful cycles. For instance, gender-sensitive policing, judicial practices, and support services could safeguard women from entering criminal trajectories while ensuring fair treatment for those involved.

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