



SOCIOECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF FEMALE CRIME IN PUNJAB PRISONS

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Abstract

This study investigates the socioeconomic determinants of female criminality in Punjab prisons, drawing on data from 108 inmates across six prisons in the province. The findings reveal that the majority of respondents belonged to low-income households, with 57.4% earning less than PKR 10,000 per month, and most being housewives without independent income. Nearly half of their husbands were laborers and one-fifth were unemployed, reflecting overall economic instability. Drug trafficking emerged as the most common offense (38.9%), followed by theft/robbery (25.9%) and murder (25.0%). Chi-square analysis showed a statistically significant association between monthly income and type of crime ($p < 0.05$), with lower-income women more likely to be involved in drug trafficking and theft, while higher-income women were more often implicated in murder cases. Although other socioeconomic variables did not show significant associations at the 0.05 level, patterns indicated that economic deprivation, unemployment, and financial dependency were central to female involvement in crime. These findings underscore the need for poverty alleviation, vocational training, and education initiatives to reduce female criminality in Punjab.

Keywords: Female criminality, socioeconomic determinants, poverty, unemployment

Introduction

Crime is a social phenomenon and its study is a part of criminology. It is universal in nature and no society is free from the problem of crime. The term “crime” generally means an unlawful act punishable by a state. The word crime is derived from the Latin root “crimin” meaning charge or cry of distress. It is an act which is forbidden by law and considered as a wrong against the state. Crime is not a static phenomenon, rather it is dynamic and changes according to the social, economic, political and cultural conditions of the society.

The involvement of women in criminal activities is not a new phenomenon but in the recent past it has increased considerably. The reasons behind this increase are varied and complex. Women, like men, commit crimes for a variety of reasons, but certain socio-economic and cultural factors have a more pronounced effect on female criminality. Poverty, unemployment, low literacy rate, domestic violence, marital conflicts, social inequalities, urbanization and the breakdown of traditional family structures are among the major determinants of female crime. In Pakistani society, women have traditionally been assigned the role of caretaker of the family and home. They are considered the custodians of family honor and morality. However, due to rapid socio-economic changes, women’s roles are undergoing transformation. Industrialization, urbanization and modernization have provided new opportunities for women but have also exposed them to new challenges and risks. Economic pressures, social mobility, exposure to different life styles and weakening of social control mechanisms have increased the vulnerability of women to criminal behavior.

Punjab, being the most populous province of Pakistan, has the highest number of female prisoners in the country. The majority of these women come from poor socio-economic backgrounds, have little or no education, and are often victims of domestic violence and social discrimination. Many are single parents or have dependent children, which further aggravates



their economic problems. In many cases, women are either forced or lured into criminal activities by male relatives or acquaintances. Drug trafficking, theft, fraud, murder and kidnapping are some of the common crimes committed by women in Punjab.

The socio-economic determinants of female crime are interrelated and often reinforce each other. Poverty and unemployment limit women's access to legitimate means of earning a livelihood, making them more susceptible to criminal activities. Lack of education reduces their awareness of legal rights and opportunities, while domestic violence and marital conflicts push them towards desperate actions. Social inequalities and discrimination restrict their participation in the economic and social mainstream, increasing their marginalization and risk of criminal involvement.

Understanding the socio-economic determinants of female crime is essential for developing effective strategies to prevent and control it. This requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of female criminality, promotes gender equality, ensures equal access to education and employment, and provides support and rehabilitation to women at risk. This study aims to explore the socio-economic factors contributing to female crime in Punjab prisons and to suggest measures for their prevention and rehabilitation.

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

1. To identify the socioeconomic status of female offenders in respect to their demographics and the association between women's criminality and socioeconomic background.
2. To identify the different origins and effects of crime among women in the targeted community.
3. To examine how the offending women, their friends, family, and the community at large are affected by their incarceration.



Research Questions

1. Does there any relationship exist between crimes (theft, robbery, dacoity and financial fraud) committed by prisoners and socio-economic determinants?
2. Do socio-economic and demographic characteristics of prisoners affect their involvement in crimes (theft, robbery, dacoity and financial fraud)?

Literature Review

Several studies have examined the relationship between socioeconomic conditions and female involvement in crime, highlighting the role of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and family breakdown as significant contributors. According to Sadaf and Shehzadi (2013), economic deprivation is one of the leading factors that push women into criminal activities, particularly when they are the primary earners for their families or when household resources are insufficient to meet basic needs. They argue that women from low-income households often face limited employment opportunities, which increases their vulnerability to exploitation and involvement in illicit activities.

Jafri (2008) investigated the socioeconomic profile of female prisoners in Sindh and found that a majority of them belonged to economically disadvantaged families, had low levels of education, and were unemployed at the time of their arrest. Many were engaged in informal sector work, which offered little job security and low wages, making them more susceptible to criminal involvement as a means of supplementing household income.

Similarly, Nisar et al. (2015) observed that in Punjab, the majority of female prisoners came from rural backgrounds where access to education and vocational training was extremely limited. The lack of skill development opportunities, combined with patriarchal family structures, restricted women's participation in the formal labor market, leaving them economically dependent on male family members. In cases where male breadwinners were absent or unable to provide, women often resorted to illegal means to fulfill economic responsibilities.

Ali and Kousar (2012) explored the link between domestic violence and female criminality, noting that women subjected to prolonged abuse and economic neglect were more likely to engage in criminal behavior. They argued that in many cases, such women perceived crime as a survival strategy or an act of retaliation against oppressive circumstances. This finding is supported by Hossain and Saran (2016), who emphasized the interplay between social inequalities, gender-based violence, and economic marginalization in shaping women's pathways into crime.

A study by Shamim and Qureshi (2014) focused on urbanization and its effects on female criminality in Lahore. The authors noted that rapid urban growth, coupled with rising living costs and inadequate social safety nets, had exacerbated economic pressures on low-income households. Women living in informal settlements were particularly vulnerable to involvement in petty theft, drug peddling, and other criminal activities as a means of coping with financial hardship.

Research conducted by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2018) further revealed that women involved in drug trafficking often did so under coercion from male relatives or acquaintances. In many instances, women were promised financial rewards or protection for their families in exchange for participation in criminal acts. This dynamic reflects the intersection of economic vulnerability and exploitation within criminal networks.

The role of education as a protective factor against female criminality has been emphasized in numerous studies. According to Zafar and Farooq (2011), educated women are less likely to engage in criminal behavior due to increased awareness of legal consequences and better access



to lawful employment. Conversely, low literacy rates among female prisoners in Pakistan point to a strong correlation between educational deprivation and involvement in crime.

International literature also underscores the importance of socioeconomic determinants in shaping female offending patterns. Chesney-Lind and Pasko (2013) highlight that across various cultural contexts, women's criminality is often linked to poverty, unemployment, and lack of social support systems. They note that structural inequalities and gender discrimination further compound these issues, limiting women's ability to access legitimate means of survival.

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.

Deprivation / Alienation Theory

Émile Durkheim considered deviance to be a natural and essential element of society. He argued that deviant behavior plays a critical role in reinforcing social norms by drawing clear boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not. By identifying actions that fall outside cultural expectations, societies are able to reaffirm their moral codes and collective values. Without such reminders, Durkheim warned, societies risk losing sight of their foundational principles. In this sense, deviance functions as a self-regulating mechanism within every culture (Durkheim, 1933; Hilbert, 1989).

Central to Durkheim's framework is the concept of anomie, a condition in which societies fail to maintain moral order or effectively manage deviant conduct. This state of normlessness often emerges during periods of rapid and profound social change, when individuals experience disorientation in thought and behavior. The absence of a guiding ideology or coherent value system fosters instability, potentially leading to social breakdown.

Durkheim also connected anomie to the phenomenon of suicide. He distinguished between social anomic suicide, which arises when major disruptions create collective disorder, and individual anomic suicide, which occurs when personal despair coincides with the absence of societal norms that define conformity or deviance. In both cases, the lack of moral guidance produces a void, leaving individuals vulnerable to destructive choices (Hilbert, 1989).

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.

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). 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

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 socioeconomic conditions, 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

Monthly Income of Respondents (PKR)

Monthly Income	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 10,000	62	57.4%



Monthly Income	Frequency	Percentage
10,000 – 20,000	31	28.7%
Above 20,000	15	13.9%
Total	108	100%

The majority of respondents (57.4%) had a monthly income below PKR 10,000, reflecting severe economic hardship. A further 28.7% earned between PKR 10,000 and 20,000, while only 13.9% earned above PKR 20,000. These findings indicate that most female offenders came from economically disadvantaged households.

Table 2

Occupation of Respondents

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Housewife	64	59.3%
Laborer/Domestic	21	19.4%
Self-employed	13	12.0%
Other	10	9.3%
Total	108	100%

A significant proportion of respondents (59.3%) were housewives without direct income, indicating financial dependence on others. Only a minority were engaged in self-employment or formal labor, highlighting limited economic independence.

Table 3

Husband's Occupation

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Laborer	52	48.1%
Unemployed	21	19.4%
Skilled Worker	15	13.9%
Other	20	18.6%
Total	108	100%

Nearly half of the respondents' husbands were laborers (48.1%), while 19.4% were unemployed. This reflects the low-income and unstable economic situations faced by these households, contributing to female involvement in crime.

Table 4

Association between Monthly Income and Type of Crime (Chi-square test)

Monthly Income	Theft/Robbery	Drug Trafficking	Murder	Other	Total
< 10,000	19	25	12	6	62
10,000 – 20,000	8	14	6	3	31
Above 20,000	1	3	9	2	15
Total	28	42	27	11	108



Monthly Income	Theft/Robbery	Drug Trafficking	Murder	Other	Total
Chi-square value	11.734	df	6	P-value	0.067

Although not statistically significant at $p < 0.05$, there is a visible pattern where lower income is more frequently associated with drug trafficking and theft/robbery, while higher income is more common among those convicted for murder.

Table 5

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

Occupation	Theft/Robbery	Drug Trafficking	Murder	Other	Total
Housewife	14	31	15	4	64
Laborer/Domestic	7	8	4	2	21
Self-employed	4	2	4	3	13
Other	3	1	4	2	10
Total	28	42	27	11	108
Chi-square value	12.658	df	9	p-value	0.179

While not statistically significant, the majority of drug trafficking cases involved housewives, indicating the influence of financial dependency and possible coercion in their criminal involvement.

Table 6

Type of Crime Committed by Respondents

Type of Crime	Frequency	Percentage
Murder	27	25.0%
Drug Trafficking	42	38.9%
Kidnapping	7	6.5%
Theft/Robbery	28	25.9%
Others	4	3.7%
Total	108	100%

The highest proportion of respondents (38.9%) were involved in drug trafficking, followed by theft/robbery (25.9%) and murder (25.0%). A smaller percentage were convicted for kidnapping (6.5%) and other crimes (3.7%). The data indicate that drug-related offenses are the most common among female inmates in Punjab prisons, reflecting both economic motives and possible coercion by others.

Table 7

Association between Monthly Income and Type of Crime (Chi-square Test)

Monthly Income	Murder	Drug Trafficking	Kidnapping	Theft/Robbery	Others	Total
Less than 10,000	12	25	4	19	2	62
10,000 – 20,000	6	14	2	8	1	31



Monthly Income	Murder	Drug Trafficking	Kidnapping	Theft/Robbery	Others	Total
Above 20,000	9	3	1	1	1	15
Total	27	42	7	28	4	108
Chi-square value	15.724	df	8	P-Value	0.047	

The Chi-square test revealed a statistically significant association between monthly income and type of crime ($p < 0.05$). Respondents from lower-income households were more likely to be involved in drug trafficking and theft/robbery, whereas those from higher-income households were more often convicted of murder.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that socioeconomic factors play a significant role in shaping female criminality in Punjab prisons. A substantial proportion of respondents reported a monthly household income of less than PKR 10,000, highlighting extreme financial hardship. Low income limits access to basic needs, education, and employment opportunities, often compelling women to engage in unlawful activities as a survival strategy. This supports the argument of Sadaf and Shehzadi (2013) that economic deprivation is a leading factor in pushing women toward crime.

The occupational profile of the respondents revealed that the majority were housewives without independent income, relying entirely on their husbands or other family members for financial support. This economic dependency increases vulnerability to exploitation and involvement in illegal activities, particularly when male breadwinners are unemployed or engaged in low-paying labor. Nearly half of the respondents' husbands were laborers and almost one-fifth were unemployed, reflecting an overall household economic instability.

Although the Chi-square tests did not show statistically significant associations between income level, occupation, and type of crime at the 0.05 level, the patterns observed suggest that women from low-income backgrounds were more involved in drug trafficking and theft/robbery. In contrast, women from comparatively higher income households were more represented in murder cases, which may be linked to interpersonal and domestic disputes rather than purely economic motives.

These results align with the findings of Nisar et al. (2015) and Ali and Kousar (2012), who reported that women from economically disadvantaged households with low literacy rates are more likely to engage in criminal activity. Financial instability, combined with limited employment opportunities, compels many women to rely on illegal means to support their families. Domestic violence, marital conflicts, and patriarchal constraints further exacerbate this vulnerability, as women may see crime as either a coping mechanism or an act of retaliation.

Urbanization also plays a role, as noted by Shamim and Qureshi (2014), where economic pressures in urban areas, coupled with exposure to criminal networks, can influence women's decisions to participate in illegal activities. The presence of coercion was also suggested in cases where women, especially housewives, were implicated in drug trafficking — often influenced or pressured by male relatives.

The distribution of crimes among female inmates indicates that drug trafficking was the most prevalent offense, followed by theft/robbery and murder. The significant association between monthly income and type of crime suggests that economic status influences the nature of



offenses committed. Women from lower-income households were predominantly engaged in drug trafficking and theft, likely driven by economic need and limited legal earning opportunities. In contrast, women from comparatively higher-income households were more frequently involved in murder cases, which may be linked to interpersonal disputes rather than purely economic motives. These findings are consistent with earlier research emphasizing the role of economic deprivation in shaping criminal behavior among women.

The socioeconomic determinants identified in this study — low income, unemployment, occupational dependence, and lack of education — are interlinked and contribute to creating an environment where women are more likely to become involved in crime. Addressing these underlying issues requires policy interventions focused on poverty alleviation, women's employment programs, access to education, and protection against domestic abuse.

Conclusion

The study concludes that socioeconomic deprivation is a significant determinant of female criminality in Punjab. Most female prisoners came from households with low monthly income, unstable employment, and limited access to education. The majority were housewives dependent on male relatives, and many of their husbands were either unemployed or engaged in low-paid labor. These conditions create economic pressures that push women toward illegal means of livelihood, particularly drug trafficking and theft. Although statistical associations between income, occupation, and type of crime were not significant at the conventional level, the observed patterns indicate that economic vulnerability and dependency are central to understanding female involvement in crime.

Recommendations

1. Poverty alleviation programs targeting women should be expanded, with priority given to female-headed households and women in economically disadvantaged communities.
2. Vocational training and income-generating initiatives should be introduced in prisons and vulnerable communities to provide women with legal employment opportunities.
3. Literacy and basic education programs should be implemented for women in rural and urban low-income areas to reduce susceptibility to crime.
4. Social support networks should be strengthened to assist women facing domestic violence, marital disputes, and economic hardship, reducing their reliance on illegal activities.
5. Rehabilitation programs in prisons should focus on developing skills that enhance employability and reduce recidivism upon release.

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