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Gendered Pathways to Crime: Understanding Youth Responses to Violence in Pakistan

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates how various forms of violence exposure influence youth criminality in Lahore, Pakistan, with a central focus on gender-related differences. The study draws on in-depth interviews with 20 incarcerated young offenders (10 males and 10 females) from the Central Prison in Lahore who had experienced violence and later engaged in criminal behavior. Thematic analysis reveals distinct gendered pathways: male participants often responded to community violence through external aggression and criminal peer group involvement, while female participants frequently internalized family violence, leading to emotionally driven crimes. Media violence influenced both genders differently acting as a script for masculine identity among males and deepening psychological vulnerability among females. The study highlights the moderating role of gender in translating violent experiences into specific criminal behaviors. Findings call for gender-responsive rehabilitation programs that address the lived realities and social roles of male and female offenders.

Keywords: Gender, Violence, Criminality, Incarcerated Youth, Community Violence, Family Violence, Media Influence, Lahore, Pakistan

1. Introduction

Youth criminality remains a pressing concern in urban Pakistan, particularly in metropolitan areas like Lahore, where rising levels of violence coincide with socio-economic instability, weak family structures and digital saturation. Numerous studies globally and within South Asia have explored

the link between exposure to violence and deviant behavior (Ferguson et al., 2017; Heise & Kotsadam, 2015). However, few have analyzed how this link is conditioned by gender, particularly within the localized context of Pakistani society.

In Pakistan, males and females face different social expectations, familial roles and emotional processing frameworks, which influence their behavioral outcomes when exposed to violence. For example, boys are often encouraged to assert dominance and suppress emotions, making them more prone to externalizing behavior like aggression or gang involvement (Messerschmidt, 2018). Conversely, girls are typically socialized to be submissive and emotionally dependent, which may lead them to internalize trauma and act out in relationally dependent or covertly deviant ways (Cauffman, 2008; DeHart, 2008).

Furthermore, violence in Pakistani urban settings takes various forms—communal disputes, domestic abuse and media portrayals of aggression—which often intersect and shape youth behavior. While community violence is a visible and pervasive threat, family violence tends to be hidden and cyclical, deeply impacting emotional regulation and attachment patterns (Herrenkohl et al., 2008; Capaldi & Owen, 2001). The role of media, particularly violent content, has also been identified as a facilitator of imitation, especially among males (Anderson et al., 2003; Coyne et al., 2018).

Despite these findings, the gendered pathways from exposure to violence to actual criminal behavior have not been adequately explored in the Pakistani context. This study addresses this gap by investigating how incarcerated youth from the Central Prison in Lahore translated their experiences of community, family and media violence into criminal actions. By focusing on both the type of violence and gender, the study provides a nuanced analysis that can inform context-specific interventions. More importantly, it investigates how gendered social roles, emotional responses and societal perceptions lead to variations in criminal pathways, offering a deeper understanding of how femininity and masculinity are performed and criminalized in Pakistan.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between exposure to violence and criminal behavior is multifaceted and deeply embedded within social contexts, particularly those defined by gender. While previous literature has established that violence whether from community, family or media sources increases the risk of criminal behavior, emerging research now emphasizes how gender mediates these experiences and their outcomes.

Community Violence and Masculine Conformity: Males exposed to violence in public spaces often experience a need to demonstrate toughness and resilience. This dynamic, rooted in traditional masculinity norms, pushes boys into street alliances or gangs as coping and defense mechanisms (Anderson, 1999; Fagan, 2005). Criminality in this context becomes a performance of masculinity rather than merely a reaction to adversity. Studies in South Asia also confirm that young males often perceive fighting or territorial control as symbols of honor and strength (Ali & Khan, 2020).

Family Violence and Gendered Emotional Coping: For females, exposure to family violence results in emotional instability, relational trauma and identity disruptions. Unlike males who

externalize aggression, females often turn to self-blame, emotional withdrawal or relational deviance. DeHart (2008) emphasized that women's criminality often stems from coping with abusive family settings. This is particularly relevant in patriarchal societies where women's autonomy is limited and emotional expression is culturally constrained (Siddiqui, 2016). Such constraints lead women to commit crimes tied to emotional retaliation or relational survival.

Media Violence and Internalized Gender Roles: Media representations offer distinct behavioral scripts based on gender. Males frequently emulate dominant, violent male leads, aligning with ideals of power, dominance and invincibility (Huesmann & Taylor, 2006). Female viewers, however, encounter depictions that reinforce victimhood or dependence, which may reinforce feelings of helplessness or emotional crisis when facing real-life violence (Coyne et al., 2018). In Pakistan, unregulated media content including crime dramas, music videos and social media trends, further aggravate these perceptions, especially among youth lacking critical media literacy (Shahbaz & Mushtaq, 2021).

Gendered Perceptions of Criminality: The literature also underscores how crime is interpreted differently depending on the perpetrator's gender. While male offenders are more often rationalized as victims of socio-economic pressure, female offenders are typically seen as morally deviant or mentally unstable (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004). These interpretations shape how law enforcement and the public respond to offenders, affecting rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. Gender stereotypes further influence court judgments, prison treatment, and even media coverage of crimes (Khan et al., 2022).

Cultural Stigma and Reintegration: Female offenders, especially in conservative societies like Pakistan, face harsher societal condemnation and barriers to reintegration. Their actions are not just seen as criminal but also as violations of prescribed gender roles, which results in social exclusion (Jamil, 2015). Males, although stigmatized, often find avenues to reclaim respect through labor or familial connections. Female ex-offenders frequently encounter broken familial ties, reduced marriage prospects and psychological isolation (Iqbal & Anjum, 2018).

This review highlights the necessity of analyzing exposure to violence through a gender-sensitive lens. It provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how men and women, though subjected to similar external conditions, internalize, interpret and respond to violence in ways that lead to distinct criminal pathways. By focusing on incarcerated youth in Lahore, this study builds on existing theories while addressing a significant research gap in Pakistani criminology.

3. Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of incarcerated youth in the Central Prison in Lahore. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 20 participants (10 male and 10 female) prisoners between the ages of 18 to 30 who had histories of criminal behavior linked to exposure to violence. Participants were assured anonymity and consented to participate in in-depth interviews.

Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was conducted in Urdu and Punjabi, later translated into English. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to narrate freely while focusing on core themes: experiences of community violence, family abuse, media consumption

and emotional triggers for criminal actions. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to interpret the data.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed strong gendered variations in how exposure to violence translated into criminal behavior. Participants from the Central Prison in Lahore shared experiences that illuminated the complexity of these variations.

4.1 Community Violence and Male Criminality

Male participants frequently described community violence as an initiator of gang affiliations and public fights.

"I grew up seeing fights in my street daily. At first, it scared me. Later, I joined a group to feel safe. That's how I got involved in crimes." (Participant 4)

Male narratives often included elements of survival, status-building and dominance in response to environmental threats. In contrast, female participants described witnessing community violence as traumatizing but not directly linked to their own criminal behavior.

"I used to hide when there were gunshots. But I never thought of hurting anyone. My crime came from inside the home." (Participant 6)

4.2 Family Violence and Emotional Deviance in Females

Female offenders consistently linked their criminal behavior to ongoing abuse or neglect within the home. Many described emotional trauma, betrayal and feelings of abandonment.

"My father would beat my mother and me. When I stole from home, it was not for money—it was a cry for help." (Participant 9)

For males, family violence was framed more in terms of rebellion and identity conflict.

"My father beat me often. I didn't want to cry. So, I hit others outside instead." (Participant 2,)

4.3 Media Violence and Scripted Masculinity

Media consumption played a critical role for male offenders, particularly in shaping perceptions of toughness and retaliation.

"I watched gangster movies every day. They made me feel powerful. I wanted that life." (Participant 7)

Females reported different effects, mostly emotional disturbances or self-comparison.

"Watching those dramas where girls are always crying... I started thinking that I'm also helpless like them." (Participant)

4.4 Gendered Perceptions and Social Expectations

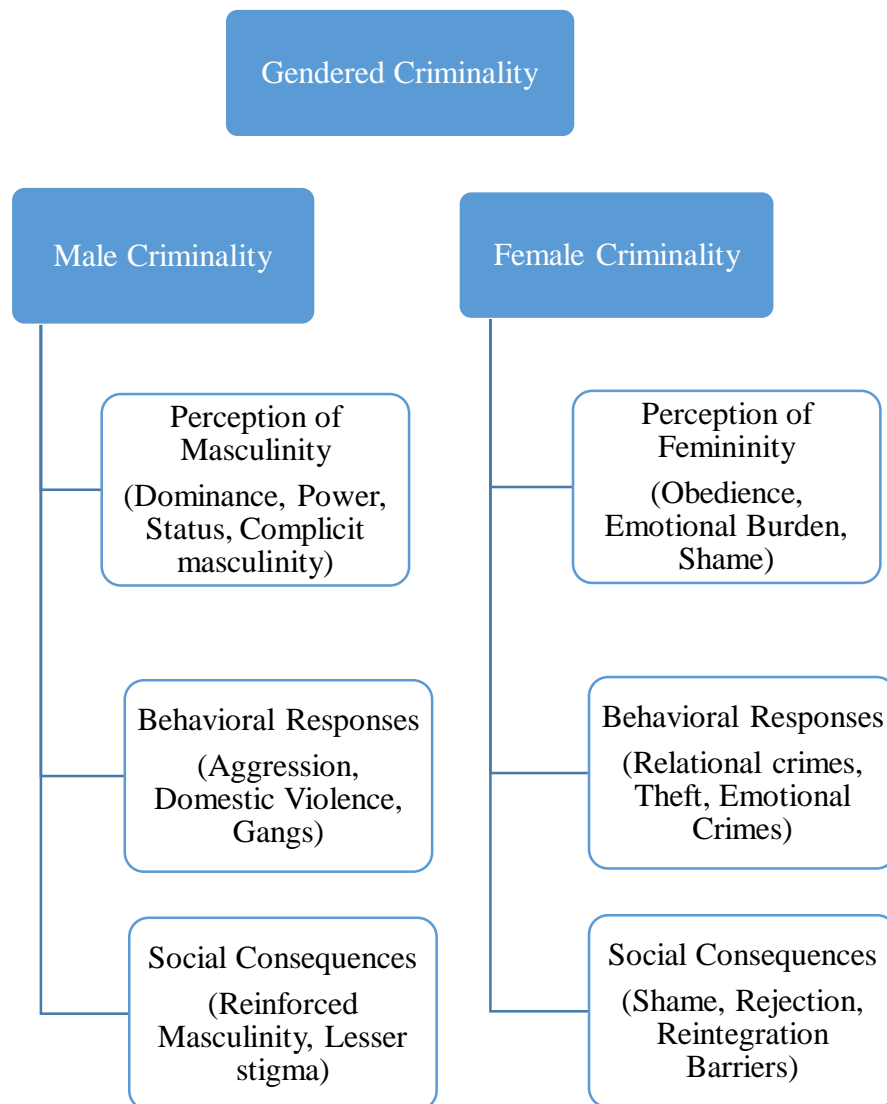
Female participants expressed heightened shame and societal rejection post-crime, often linked to cultural expectations of purity and obedience.

"People ask my mother how she could raise a criminal daughter. They don't ask that from boys' families." (Participant 5)

Males, while stigmatized, were also seen as reclaiming masculinity through deviance.

"In my area, if you don't fight, people think you're weak. I had to prove I wasn't." (Participant 8)

These findings underscore how social structures, emotional responses and cultural narratives shape not only the act of violence but also its internalization, justification and consequence—differently for men and women.



5. Conclusion

The study reveals that while community, family and media violence are all contributors to youth criminality in Lahore, the gendered responses to these forms of violence are significantly different. Males externalize and replicate violence through aggression, gang culture and identity assertion, whereas females internalize trauma, leading to emotionally reactive or relationally motivated offenses. These findings highlight the critical role of socialization, cultural

expectations and gender norms in shaping how young men and women process and respond to violent environments.

Understanding these divergent pathways is essential for developing gender-responsive criminal justice strategies in Pakistan. Rehabilitation efforts must be attuned not only to the type of violence experienced but also to the emotional and social processing styles shaped by gender roles. Interventions that ignore these gendered distinctions risk being ineffective or even re-traumatizing for vulnerable populations.

Moreover, the institutional framing of crime, which often rationalizes male deviance and pathologizes female deviance must be critically revisited. Gendered stigmas influence not only societal reintegration but also the emotional well-being and identity reconstruction of formerly incarcerated individuals. Female offenders, in particular, face heightened barriers due to cultural ideals of purity and obedience, whereas male offenders may be more readily reintegrated through notions of reclaimed masculinity.

To mitigate these disparities, rehabilitation and reintegration programs should include trauma-informed counseling, gender-sensitive training for prison staff and community awareness campaigns that challenge traditional gender narratives. Educational and vocational programs tailored to both male and female needs can empower youth and reduce recidivism.

Lastly, future research should delve deeper into intersectional factors such as class, education and rural-urban divides that intersect with gender to influence pathways into crime. Only through such nuanced inquiry can criminal justice policies move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and foster equitable, effective reform in Pakistan's penal and social systems.

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