

## Socio-Economic Factors Influencing Female Criminality in Nigeria

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### Abstract

Crime is inevitable and over the years, Nigeria has witnessed a surge in criminal activities involving both women and youths. This paper examined socio-economic factors influencing female criminality in Nigeria, the effect it has on the society and the possible ways to curtail this menace. Female criminality refers to those kinds of crime committed by females. The study adopted the general strain theory and social learning theory as framework in explaining the reasons for female involvement in crime. Both theories explained why females resort to unconventional means to achieve financial success. It was deduced that there are quite a number of socio-economic factors which influence female criminality in Nigeria and they include unemployment, poverty, drug use, lack of education and prerequisite skills. It also stated that there are lots of adverse consequences female criminality has on Nigeria as a society which is the fact that it poses a danger to the socialization process as women are at the fore front of socialization in every society. This paper strongly recommends that proper parenting as well as acquisition of various relevant skills should be prioritized as it provides an alternative in the absence of employment in Nigeria. Also, the different ways in which women are marginalized and discriminated against should be addressed as equal opportunity irrespective of gender will help in curbing the need for females to turn to crime as a coping strategy.

**Keywords:** crime, female, socialization, socio-economic factors, unemployment

### Introduction

Crime has been in existence since the beginning of creation, yet there has been no solution to this menace. The subject of female criminality cannot be understood without an understanding of the concepts of crime and criminality. Criminality refers to the conditions and behaviors that the state has agreed constitute crimes (Darroch, 2016). Over the years, Nigeria has been witnessing unprecedented rise as well as sophistication in criminal activities. This new wave cuts across all sections of the society including men, women and children. Crime is inevitable and over the years, Nigeria has witnessed a surge in crime

ranging from violent to victimless crimes which can be said to be a reaction to the economic challenges evident in Nigeria.

Overtime, the society has devised means of controlling crime and dealing with those who deviate from its norms. The communal system of living added to the internal and external mechanisms for crime control mainly of ridicule and public disgrace kept the level of criminal activities by women low (Chukuezi, 2006).

Statistics have shown that crime is on the upward trend and according to OSAC (2016), crime is more severe in Latin America and Africa with Nigeria positioned 6<sup>th</sup> among crime prone countries with bank transfer scams, kidnapping, drug distribution, prostitution, mugging, rape and general corruption among the commonly committed crimes in the country.

Women represent the fastest growing criminal population, growing by almost a third over the course of the 1990s and almost a third of all incarcerated women report have been on welfare in the period just prior to their arrest, and yet despite the apparent dramatic increase in the criminal behavior of poor women, the study of women's criminality remains in its infancy (Chukuezi, 2006). In the last few years, the rate of female criminality is increasing in Nigeria at an alarming rate and women are committing new types of crimes and most of their crimes remain hidden because it is very difficult for the law enforcement agency to detect them as they are adopting new policy for committing crime (Nwankwo, 2020). In view of the aforementioned problems, this study examines the socio-economic factors influencing female criminality in Nigeria.

### **Concept of Female Criminality**

According to Lombroso and Ferrero (1898), the term female criminality refers to those kinds of crimes which are committed by only females. Any behavior that is contrary to the criminal law and exhibited by females can be seen as female criminality. Globally, it is estimated that urban crime and violence of which female criminality is part have increased between three to five percent every year over the past twenty years (Annang, 2021). It was believed till a few decades ago that crime is predominantly a male phenomenon but some

researchers like Giddens, Datesman and Scarpitti (1975) have shown that women also commit crimes especially as there have been changes in the traditional roles of women (Nwankwo, 2020).

Women no longer act as accomplices but also perpetrators of crimes (Oyelade, 2019). That is evident in the fact that women are paraded alongside men by security agencies in Nigeria including the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) for cases of fraud, kidnapping, suicide bombing and public funds embezzlement to mention a few. Nwankwo (2020) posits that in Nigeria, female criminality is becoming a cliché' as the number of females involved in suicide bombing, ritual killings, public funds embezzlement and other forms of violent and non- violent crimes is steadily increasing posing a challenge to the nation's security and presents immediate threat to Nigerians because of the roles of females in the process of socialization and childcare. In agreement to this, Esiri (2016) believes that female criminality is a threat to the security of a nation and a major factor associated with underdevelopment because it reduces quality of life, destroys human and social capital and damages relationship between citizens.

Consequently, the society is already suffering untold pressure occasioned by the upsurge of female criminality. According to Nyen and Ejue (2022), it is obvious that the vice of female involvement in crimes is endemic with far reaching consequences. Amidst all the raging debates is the nexus between female gender, the family, the socialization of the younger generation and the continuity of the society, which scholars wonder if this female criminality persists, what would be the outcome of the ethos and principles of our society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

General strain theory and social learning theory were adopted as the framework for this study. These theories were adopted on the ground that one complements the other to give a broad perspective to the understanding of the issues in contention.

General strain theory of Agnew (2014) was built on Robert Merton's strain theory. The theory provides a distinctive explanation of crime; it postulates that crime results from negative emotions such as frustration, anger, despair and depression among others.

General strain theory states that individuals who lack some socio-economic opportunities in life or whatever they consider necessary or relevant to their well-being are likely to act in defence or acquisition of that right. These negative emotions according to the theory put people on the journey to search for remedies with crime as a possible destination. The theory states that crime is an avenue to escape perceived strain for instance, when one is in dire need of money and material wealth, the person is constantly discriminated against and faces parental rejection and victimization, he tends to turn to crime as a means of seeking revenge against the source of the strain. General strain theory also states that strain advances the tendency for an individual to commit crime especially when such strain is perceived as unjust, that creates some incentives for criminals. Agnew (2006) argues that when individuals cannot adapt to a situation lawfully, they become disposed to crime in the society.

The theory just like every other theory has faced some criticisms over the years. It was criticized for failing to explain why some and not all strained individuals take to crime as an alternative. Also, it was criticized for lacking adequate empirical evidence and its narrow explanations of strain. Strain theory has also been criticized for the fact that it best applies only to the lower class as they struggle with limited resources to obtain and achieve their goals. In spite of all these criticisms, the theory has enjoyed significant level of consideration since its inception. The theory is therefore relevant to the study for the fact that it indicates that the lack of socio-economic indicators and factors can cause strain which in turn can influence female criminality. A person can commit crime irrespective of gender if the person is frustrated. Frustration is an emotion which most citizens of Nigeria including females are grappling with which can occur as a result of unemployment, poverty, poor parental background, place of residence etc. hence, strain is the reason for the increase in female criminality in Nigeria as crime is regarded as a means to achieve financial freedom which seemed impossible due to lack of socio-economic factors.

Social learning theory was formulated by Bandura (1977) and was built on Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory. It was used to analyze how deviant behaviors as well as conformity can be learned through both social and non-social reinforcements and that the learning of criminal behaviors occurs in social interactions with other people.

The theory also analyzes how people develop motivation and the skills to commit crimes through the people whom they associate with.

According to social learning theory, people engage in crime because of their association with others who engage in crime. Their criminal behaviors are reinforced and they learn beliefs that are favorable to crime. They essentially have criminal models that they associate with; as a consequence, these individuals come to view crime as something that is justifiable in certain situations. Learning criminal or deviant behavior is the same as learning to engage in conforming behavior and it is done through association with or exposure to others. In fact, association with friends is the best predictor of delinquent behavior other than prior delinquency. Social learning theory postulates that there are three mechanisms by which individuals learn to engage in crime; differential reinforcement, beliefs and modeling.

Social learning theory states that female criminality is acquired through interaction and association with criminals either of the same or opposite gender which can mostly occur in the place of residence, workplace and social media. Most female residents in the slum and ghettos tend to be affected; criminal behaviors such as prostitution and drug abuse are mostly acquired through interaction and association with deviants. This theory also explains why members of the upper class also commit white collar crimes and this criminal behavior is maintained over time when it is frequently reinforced and infrequently punished. This reinforcement might be in form of money, social approval or pleasure. Studies have shown that individuals who are reinforced for their crimes are more likely to engage in subsequent crimes especially when they are in situations similar to those that were previously reinforced.

Despite the contribution of social learning theory to the understanding of behaviorism and social issues like crime and female criminality, critics contend that the theory overemphasized environmental factors in determining behaviors while neglecting individual differences. It has also been critiqued for failure to identify who the first criminal learnt from. Another major criticism of social learning theory includes that it assumes

passivity in the nature of the observer who receives rewards or punishments, the theory fails to explain why certain behaviors are rewarded or punished.

In spite of the criticisms, the theory is relevant to this study as it explains why females who belong to either the upper class or lower class engage in criminal activities. It can also be used to explain why females regardless of their socio-economic background engage in victimless, violent and white collar crimes, which is reinforcement. General strain theory and social learning theory have been adopted as the theoretical framework because they are relevant, appropriate and best explain the phenomenon at hand.

## **Literature Review**

### **Socio Economic Factors Influencing Female Criminality in Nigeria**

Crimes females commit in recent times are on the increase and scholars have attributed that to so many reasons. Islam and Khatun (2013) and Siegel (2007) postulate that marginalization of women in the family and at the workplace are the reasons for the increase in female criminality. According to Staton-Tindall (2010), nearly 60 percent of female inmates in State Correctional Centers had experienced physical abuse in the past especially when they were young and 40 percent of the female inmates in State Correctional Centers were drug abusers. According to a United Nations Report (1989), the use of illegal drugs and crime go hand in hand, in so many cases, drug users will literally do anything to obtain enough money to satisfy their drug use habits. Rushforth and Willis (2003) perceive women's drug use as a defining factor in their participation in crime. They argued that the severity of a woman's drug use is more closely related to their criminality than it is for men particularly for prostitution and property crime. To Obafemi (2018), drug use is the primary reason many females have been incarcerated in the society today.

Bartollas (2000) and Richie (2000) acknowledged that with the advent of globalization and advancement in technology, it was difficult to explore the causes of increased violence, crime rates, terrorism and anarchic crimes as well as high female and juvenile delinquency, it was therefore disconcerting to know that uneducated women or under privileged women were more likely to commit crimes. These all point to the fact that gender marginalization,

past physical abuse, drug use; illiteracy among many others are the reasons why women commit crimes in societies.

Female criminality can be said to be determined by other socio-economic factors such as peer influence, poor parenting, influence of social media, spousal/relationship issues, frustration, family problems and widening socio-economic opportunities open to women in the labour force to mention a few. This view was shared by Ameh (2013) when he identified poverty as the main reason for the increase in female criminality. He explains that when females are deprived of certain resources and opportunities, it can create resentment which in turn results to female criminality in order to satisfy basic needs. Aborisade and Oni (2020) believe that in all the reasons for committing crime, females experience larger share; poverty, unemployment, material and financial deprivation, government policies etc, so when talking about the effect of poverty on individuals, females suffer more than males. Hence, some females see armed robbery as the easiest of all crimes because of the ease of operation, quick access to money and material needs that they get in one quick operation

Unemployment and poverty also play great role in female criminal activity. Annang (2021) postulated that a strong fall of the wages of women without qualifications increases the probability of committing crimes. Women who are poor and have no access to productive recourses may engage in some criminal activities, including sex work for their economic survival. This sentiment was shared by Streetsheet (2005) when he stated that about 70 percent of prostitutes are mothers, mostly single mothers struggling to support families, faced with difficult economic choices and the evisceration of health, education and social services, women living in poverty may become entangled in the criminal justice system.

Nonetheless, Adler (1975) in her publication, *Sisters in crime: The rise of the female offender*, believed that as women gained more opportunities outside the home, positions previously unavailable to them, its resultant effect is the increase in female criminality. Thus, with the increase in the number of females in the workforce, there would be an analogous rise in female offending and criminality (Rennison, 2014). Campeniello (2014) avers that the number of women committing crimes is on the rise partly because the socio-

economic gender gaps have been shrinking. Women have more freedom than in the past and with that come more opportunities for crime. Previous studies have suggested that limited educational background and lack of education influenced female criminality but Adler (1975) argues differently and opines that educated girls and women are keener to defy traditional restrictions and social roles. In line with this, Lochner and Morreti (2003) believe that it is also possible that education raises the direct marginal returns of crime like in the case of certain white collar crimes that are likely to require higher levels of education.

Sutherland (1947) is of the view that social variables such as place of residence and associations are important factors that influence female criminality. People who share same socio-economic conditions prefer living in same environment. The ghettos are a perfect example of this preference. Similarly, Esiri (2016) submits that females become delinquent through association with people who are the carriers of criminal norms and criminal behaviors are learned within primary groups particularly the peer groups. Consequently, it can be agreed that the predominant socio-economic factors that influence female criminality is poverty which is as a result of unemployment, lack of education, place of residence and drug use, though the change in the traditional roles of women in the society has also been a force that influenced female criminality as well educated and employed females also tend to commit white collar crimes.

### **Forms of Female Criminality in Nigeria**

Available report from NDDC, 2017 shows that the following are considered critical female crimes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; dealing in illicit drugs, illegal trafficking of weapons, human trafficking, corruption and money laundry, violent crimes and terrorism, theft, shoplifting and swindling, cybercrime and robbery, credit card scam-extortion and sabotage.

Women are also involved in variety of criminal activities in Nigeria, their crimes differ and occur in various forms and different ambience. It spans through the family, community and other social institutions which include; domestic violence, prostitution, embezzlement of public funds, drug abuse. Dambazau (2006) affirms and states that women commit crimes



such as prostitution, promiscuity, manslaughter, kidnapping, terrorism, drug trafficking, conspiracy, illegal pregnancy, verbal aggression, defiance, shoplifting and so on. Enahoro (2017) observed that dailies and social media are becoming full of stories concerning the phenomenon of spousal killing by women which is more prominent amongst a relatively financial well off. Evidence of this assertion lies in the arrest of Maryam Sanda on the suspicion that she stabbed her husband (Enahoro, 2017), this is only a case out of many others. Hile (2017) observed that women are also engaging in white collar crimes such as embezzlement of public treasury, conspiracy, terrorism, suicide bombing and abuse of office.

Nigeria has become a country where female criminality is reported on a daily basis and attended to by the criminal justice system - the courts, the police and the correctional institutions (France-Press, 2015). These reechoes the sentiment that as women gained more opportunities outside the home, positions previously unavailable to them, its resultant effect is the increase in female criminality. In the pre-industrial societies, women were domesticated and that limited their opportunities to commit crimes as they are mostly tasked with keeping the home but the industrial revolution has given women more freedom than in the past and with that come more opportunities for crime and that is evident in the forms of crime committed by women.

### **Consequences of Female Criminality in Nigeria**

Chukuezi (2009) agreed that with increased cases of female criminality, moral in society is way off, on account of women losing that platform with which to challenge and advocate for uprightness in society. Among other consequences of female criminality is the effect it has on families as it tends to disintegrate families. Warraich and Farooq (2015) contend that societies where the family institution is not bonded enough to socialize its members firmly according to its approved and cherished societal norms, usually experience disintegration which in turn fuels criminal adventures and indulgence among females who hitherto see family as their model. Nyen and Ejue (2022) believe that as a result of shame and stigma, many families whose female spouses have one criminal record or the other are known to experience disintegration.

Oketch (1999) in her study "*Factors affecting female criminality in Kenya*" observed that among the effect of female imprisonment in the society are spiraling poverty, child mortality and family disorganization. She contended that families who have their female members incarcerated bear the burden of disintegration, often contribute to malnourished street children and child prostitution. Alemika (2014) argues that the involvement of females in crime accelerates violence and impedes security and development. The mother figure in the African societies and family settings usually carries the major responsibility of socialization, hence her absence for any reason whatsoever, especially on account of criminality and imprisonment, tends to leave a devastating effect on the family, younger generation and the development of society.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, being aware of the prevalence of female criminality in societies, this study shares an exposition on the socio-economic factors that influence female criminality in Nigeria. It however recognizes the fact that the major cause of female criminality is the change in the traditional roles of women as women now have the same opportunity as men to commit crimes in the society. With the involvement of women in the economic activities in Nigeria coupled with the development of science and technology, the need, opportunity and means to commit crimes have been presented to not just the men but everyone in the society including women and youths. This study also raises concern on the consequences of female criminality on the socialization process in Nigeria and its adverse effect on the family. Skill acquisition for females as well as policies geared at achieving societal goals will go a long way in curbing this menace because female criminality has the capacity to blur national growth and development.

### **Recommendations**

Therefore to curb the menace called female criminality, the study recommends the following;

1. Adequate and proper parenting should be given to the children by both parents and guardians, the significance of good morals and virtues should be emphasized as children and youths are the bedrock of every society's future.
2. Acquisition of various skills should be prioritized in the educational sector especially for females. Grants and soft loans should also be provided by the government to enable the girl child to be more self-reliant which in turn will contribute to the growth of the economy.
3. The political and socio-economic policies should gear towards meeting the basic needs of life of everyone in the society irrespective of class, religion and ethnicity with a special focus on the social development goals.
4. The different ways in which women are marginalized and discriminated against should be addressed, every child should be given equal opportunities irrespective of gender and this should reflect in all sectors including education, employment, inheritance, income disparities etc.
5. Members of the public should be well sensitized on the consequences of female criminality which is said to destroy the socialization structure of the society, by so doing, religious and traditional leaders should engage more with families and members of the society on the need to conform to societal norms and laws.
6. Female offenders should be punished in the same way their male counterparts are punished as it would serve as a deterrent to anyone who intends to deviate or engage in various criminal acts and behaviors.

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