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From Trauma to Prison to Stigma: Gendered Pathways and Post-Release Reintegration of Women in Pakistan

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Abstract
This study applies Gendered Pathways Theory (GPT) within feminist criminology to examine how gendered life experiences shape women's trajectories to crime and their post-release reintegration in Pakistan. Drawing on narrative interviews with seven women formerly incarcerated at Central Jail Rawalpindi (Adiala Jail), the study documents (i) gendered conditions preceding women's criminalization domestic and sexual violence, coercive relationships, poverty, and institutional failures and (ii) layered barriers to reintegration after release, including stigma, identity rupture, livelihood precarity, and continued exposure to exploitative actors. Using a narrative approach, we present seven case vignettes and a cross-case thematic synthesis. Accounts show that women's lawbreaking is often entangled with victimization and constrained agency, where 'choice' is shaped by abuse, dependence, deception, and coercion, and where policing and legal processes can exacerbate harm through intimidation, corruption, and delays. After release, participants describe 'social punishment' through labeling and exclusion, compounded by financial instability, family breakdown, and limited access to trauma-informed services. The analysis extends GPT by providing Pakistan-based evidence on how patriarchal norms, weak protective institutions, and punitive penal practices converge to produce a trauma-to-prison-to-marginalization pipeline. We conclude with implications for gender-responsive policing, legal aid, sentencing, prison-based rehabilitation, and structured post-release support systems, emphasizing the need for state-civil society coordination and community sensitization.

Keywords: *Gendered pathways theory; feminist criminology; narrative analysis; women offenders; reintegration; stigma; Pakistan; Adiala Jail.*

1. Introduction

Women's pathways into the criminal justice system are rarely explained adequately by gender-neutral criminological accounts. Feminist criminology has long argued that women's criminalization is frequently linked to gendered victimization, coercive relationships, relational dependence, and structural disadvantage—conditions that shape both trajectories to crime and the capacity to desist after release.

In Pakistan, these dynamics are intensified by patriarchal norms that regulate women's mobility and respectability, uneven access to protection and justice, and limited gender-responsive services inside and outside prisons. Empirical work on women's lived experiences of criminalization and reintegration remains limited and often descriptive, leaving gaps in how gendered life histories intersect with policing, courts, incarceration, and post-release social life. Recent scholarship on policing in Pakistan also emphasizes how colonial institutional legacies and weak accountability shape officer–public relations and can enable coercive, confession-oriented

practices in custody—dynamics that may intersect with women's gendered vulnerabilities across the criminal justice process (Khan et al., 2023; Khan & Ullah, 2026).

This study addresses two guiding research questions: (RQ1) How are pathways to crime gendered for women formerly incarcerated at Adiala Jail? (RQ2) How do female ex-convicts in Pakistan experience reintegration into society after release?

The paper makes three contributions. First, it provides Pakistan-based qualitative evidence that foregrounds women's voices on violence, coercion, deception, and constrained agency preceding incarceration. Second, it documents how reintegration is shaped not only by material needs but also by stigma, identity rupture, and continuing vulnerability to exploitation. Third, it derives policy-relevant implications for gender-responsive criminal justice reforms and post-release support, including the role of civil society organizations in bridging service gaps.

2. Theoretical framework

Gendered Pathways Theory (GPT) emphasizes that women's involvement in crime is shaped by gendered social structures and life experiences rather than reflecting the same developmental and situational mechanisms typically used to explain men's offending. GPT directs analytic attention to victimization (including domestic and sexual violence), relational contexts (family, intimate partners, and kinship networks), and structural constraints (poverty, limited education, restricted labor market access) that can produce 'pathways' into criminalized acts.

In applying GPT, this paper also attends to intersectional vulnerability. Women's exposure to harm and their capacity to access protection are patterned by class, education, marital status, location (urban/rural), and the social meanings attached to 'respectability'. These positions shape both the likelihood of criminalization and the intensity of post-release stigma.

Finally, the analysis treats criminalization and reintegration as institutional processes. Policing practices, court delays, incarceration conditions, and post-release service environments actively shape women's trajectories, perceptions of justice, and opportunities for repair. This is particularly relevant where institutional weakness, corruption, and patriarchal moral regulation may deepen harm during and after incarceration. These institutional dynamics are frequently linked to enduring colonial organizational logics within the Police Service of Pakistan (Khan et al., 2023) and to routinized custodial violence and coercive confession-taking documented in recent Pakistan-based qualitative evidence (Khan & Ullah, 2026).

3. Methods

3.1 Research design and approach

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach with a narrative research design. Narrative interviews were selected to support life-history accounts of criminalization, incarceration, and reintegration, and to preserve participants' meaning-making and sequencing of events.

3.2 Site and participants

The research is anchored in Central Jail Rawalpindi (Adiala Jail) as the institutional reference point for participants' incarceration histories. The final sample comprises seven female ex-convicts who had spent at least six months in prison. Participants were accessed through snowball sampling, reflecting the practical challenges of locating women after release due to residential mobility and changes in contact information.

3.3 Data collection

In-depth interviews were conducted using open-ended prompts. Interviews were conducted in Urdu and, in one case, in Potohari. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and, where relevant, translated into English for analysis and reporting. Field notes were maintained to document contextual observations and non-verbal cues.

3.4 Analytic procedure and rigor

Analysis combined narrative case construction with inductive coding. Transcripts were read iteratively; emergent themes were identified within and across cases, and interpretations were refined through constant comparison. To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed anonymization through pseudonyms, thick description, and triangulation between interview accounts and field observations.

3.5 Ethics

Given the sensitivity of discussing incarceration, abuse, and stigma, ethical safeguards included informed consent, voluntary participation with the right to pause or discontinue, confidentiality protections, and attention to emotional well-being during interviews.

Table 1. Participant profile (pseudonyms)

Participants pseudonyms	**Age**	**Time since release**	**Duration of imprisonment**	**Offense type**	**Marital Status**	**Children**	**Occupation**
Zahida	55	22 years	1 year 3 months	Murder (302)	Widow	5	Lady Tailor
Nargis	42	13 years	5 years 6 months	Murder (302)	Married	5	Beautician
Rabail	38	10 years	5 years 6 months	Murder (302)	Divorced and then remarried	1	Waitress
Fakhra	43	10 years	12 years	Assisting husband in hiding the crime of Murder	Divorced	5	Tailoress
Kausar	45	10 years	4 years 4 months	Carrying Drugs (9C)	Married	None	Nanny
Natasha	35	6 months	4 years 2 months	Carrying Drugs (9C)	Married	7	Housewife
Faiza	32	5 years	3 months	Attempt to Murder	Separated	1	House help

4. Findings

Findings are presented in two layers: (i) seven case vignettes describing pathways into crime and (ii) a cross-case thematic synthesis focusing on incarceration experiences and reintegration after release.

4.1 Case vignette: Zahida

Zahida described a long history of domestic and sexual violence within marriage. She reported that the abuse was widely known within her social environment, yet informal and formal protection mechanisms failed to interrupt the cycle. Her account depicts the narrowing of options over time: repeated violence, social pressure to 'adjust', and fear of escalation if she left. In her narrative, the criminalized act (killing her husband) is framed not as a planned offense but as an act situated within chronic victimization and perceived absence of recourse. Zahida's account is marked by a progression from endurance to desperation, with the immediate incident occurring after another episode of severe violence and threats.

Zahida further emphasized the social ambivalence surrounding her case: while relatives reportedly knew about the violence, the expectation to preserve marriage and family honor constrained intervention. Her account illustrates a core proposition of GPT in patriarchal

contexts: when abuse is normalized, and institutions do not provide credible protection, women's 'choices' can be reduced to unsafe and criminalized responses.

Illustrative excerpts

"Even when he pleaded, I kept stabbing until he stopped breathing. These drug-addicted men… they only know how to talk. They cannot act. He could not even defend himself."

"No one said a word to me, because everyone already knew."

4.1 Case vignette: Nargis

Nargis's pathway differs from domestic violence as the primary driver; her narrative centers on harassment, blackmail, and the institutional handling of a crisis. She described being pursued and threatened by a man who contacted her from different numbers and attempted to coerce her into a relationship. As harassment intensified, she described fear for her children and social standing.

The criminalization episode in her account is framed as a sequence of events in which a 'refusal' to comply with harassment escalated into a situation that resulted in imprisonment. Her narrative highlights the vulnerability created by gendered moral regulation: women's reputations can be weaponized, and seeking help may itself generate stigma.

Nargis repeatedly returned to the cost of incarceration for a woman with caregiving responsibilities, including psychological distress and a sense of lost life years. Her account underscores how gendered victimization can produce pathways to criminalization even when women perceive themselves as living 'peacefully' before the incident.

Illustrative excerpts

"He used to follow me. He would call me from different numbers and say things like, "I've fallen in love with you. Leave your children and come with me.""

"I used to think why it happened to me... I ruined my whole life, only God and I know what I endured in those 5 ½ years, completely abandoned."

4.1 Case vignette: Rabail

Rabail's narrative foregrounds kinship exploitation and coercive policing. She described being trapped in a crime plan associated with male relatives; her presence at the scene became a basis for suspicion. She reported pressure to accept responsibility, describing intimidation and threats that exploited her vulnerability as a woman confronted by multiple men.

Rabail also described material dispossession and humiliation linked to the arrest process: police raid practices, seizure of valuables, and treatment that blurred the line between investigation and punishment. In her account, family members were also detained, intensifying pressure to confess and creating cascading harms.

Post-event, Rabail described how imprisonment reshaped her intimate and social relationships. She reported divorce linked to stigma and 'purity' narratives, reflecting how incarceration can transform a woman's social identity and marital eligibility. Her case illustrates how patriarchal kinship and institutional coercion can combine to criminalize women and disrupt life trajectories even when women contest culpability.

Illustrative excerpts

"Imagine ten men standing in front of a woman, saying they will strip her, burn her body with cigarettes... Of course, that woman will say, 'Yes, I have committed ten murders.'"

"My jewelry was ripped from my ears, my bangles pulled off so violently that I never got them back."

4.1 Case vignette: Fakhra

Fakhra's pathway reflects relational dependence and 'secondary criminalization' through association with a spouse. She described being entangled in a serious case linked to her

husband's actions and decisions. Her narrative shows how limited education, economic dependence, and gendered expectations of marital loyalty constrained her ability to exit or resist.

She described a prolonged period of instability after the triggering event, including displacement and insecurity. Her account also includes allegations of corruption and dispossession during the policing process, where household goods and savings were taken under the cover of 'investigation'.

Fakhra emphasized the compounded consequences of incarceration: deterioration of health inside prison, intense anxiety about children's safety, and post-release abandonment. She reported marital breakdown despite her view that the underlying wrongdoing stemmed from her husband, illustrating how women may bear disproportionate penalties within family and community even when their legal involvement is relational and indirect.

Illustrative excerpts

"They ransacked our home, they even took the glass jar where I used to save money."

"It was his fault that brought us here, yet in the end, he divorced me."

4.1 Case vignette: Kausar

Kausar's account exemplifies women's entanglement in narcotics cases through relational trust and lack of legal awareness. She described financial strain within the household and the appeal of small income opportunities presented as legitimate. Within this context, she accompanied her husband in what she believed was routine transport work.

At a checkpoint, the discovery of narcotics transformed the situation into a major criminal case. Kausar's narrative emphasizes shock, lack of knowledge about the substances, and limited agency during the arrest process. She described the way structural constraints—debt, dependence, and limited decision-making power—produced exposure to high-risk situations without informed consent.

The case also illustrates how drug trafficking networks can use 'ordinary' people as cover, shifting legal risk onto those with less power. For women, the legal consequences intersect with stigma and caregiving responsibilities, generating layered harms beyond the sentence itself.

Illustrative excerpts

"When they stopped us and asked what we were carrying, my husband replied honestly, 'Tea.' He had no idea. None of us did."

"That was the beginning of our destruction."

4.1 Case vignette: Natasha

Natasha's narrative also involves Section 9C charges, but through peer deception rather than spousal association. She described trusting a friend who arranged travel with an unfamiliar companion and instructed her on what to tell the police if stopped. Her account suggests a deliberate strategy to use her as a 'low suspicion' carrier.

At a motorway checkpoint, she reported being asked to speak on behalf of the group and then witnessing the discovery of narcotics. Natasha emphasized fear and confusion, noting that assurances of help after arrest did not materialize. The experience illustrates how women can be targeted as 'cover' because of gendered assumptions about innocence, mobility, and caregiving roles.

Natasha also highlighted anxiety about children and the social costs of incarceration, including the challenge of re-establishing stability after release. Her case underscores how deception, low legal literacy, and weak protective networks can create rapid pathways into severe legal consequences.

Illustrative excerpts

"I had no idea what had just happened to me. I was so scared and anxious."
"I told the police I was taking the child to the village."

4.1 Case vignette: Faiza

Faiza's pathway is rooted in rural livelihood insecurity, property conflict, and gendered vulnerability after marital separation. She described living with her daughter and mother and relying on a small piece of land attached to the home as the basis of survival.

Conflict emerged when a landlord sought to purchase the land at a low price. After she refused, she reported an incident of violence and subsequent criminalization through an attempted murder case. Her narrative depicts the fragility of women's protection when they lack male backing, and how land disputes can become criminalized encounters for women in unequal power relations.

Faiza's account also emphasizes the post-release burden of rebuilding life without family support, under stigma, while supporting an elderly mother and a child through informal work.

Illustrative excerpts
"bad woman."

4.2 Cross-case thematic synthesis

Across cases, pathways to criminalization clustered around three overlapping mechanisms consistent with GPT: (i) chronic victimization and survival responses, (ii) coercion and relational entanglement, and (iii) structural insecurity (poverty and low legal literacy) that shaped exposure to risk and narrowed the plausibility of lawful coping options.

Stigma and identity rupture were repeatedly described as a 'social punishment' that continued after release. Participants reported that prison history was treated as a permanent identity marker, undermining belonging, trust, and marriageability and limiting participation in social and economic life.

"Jail Walian"
"double punishment"

Financial precarity was both a pathway condition and a reintegration barrier. Women described downward mobility, debt, and difficulty accessing dignified work after release; poverty interacted with stigma to intensify vulnerability.

"We were set in our lives,"
"but when I returned, there was nothing but a few basic things of everyday use."

Dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system centered on perceived injustice, delayed procedures, and coercive investigation practices. Several accounts emphasize that early institutional responses can intensify harm for women, including reputational damage and prolonged uncertainty.

"there isn't any justice in our criminal justice system"
"justice should be provided in time, and women should not be immediately put into prison,"

Prison was commonly described as an institution of punishment rather than rehabilitation. Respondents emphasized lack of privacy, stress, exposure to exploitation, and limited meaningful services; the prison environment itself was perceived as shaping future vulnerability.

"You see, just like Allah has created two paths in life one right and one wrong the same two paths exist inside prison as well"
"The system is broken, and the prison staff are involved in making it worse. They know exactly what's going on inside, who is doing what, and they are all complicit. They support those behaviors; they're aware of it all. Many women don't change even after being released"

Respondents and the broader analysis point to the need for structured post-release support and gender-responsive reforms. A common recommendation was time-bound state support after release to stabilize housing and livelihoods and reduce dependence on exploitative relationships.
"The government should do something for a woman leaving prison, should get some security and support, either give them money for 2 years, in that time, I am sure she can do something for herself and can be independent."

5. Discussion

The findings reinforce central claims of Gendered Pathways Theory in a Pakistani context. First, women's criminalization is frequently entangled with victimization and constrained agency. In Zahida's account, long-term domestic and sexual violence, normalization of abuse, and absent protection shaped a pathway where violence was framed as a last resort. In Rabail's account, coercion and coercive policing produced criminalization dynamics that conventional offender-focused models struggle to capture.

Second, patriarchal moral regulation amplifies the harms of incarceration. Stigma operates as a continuation of punishment after release, transforming imprisonment into a durable identity marker that affects marriage prospects, family relations, and access to employment. This 'social punishment' is particularly acute for women because incarceration is treated as a violation of gendered respectability norms, regardless of legal culpability or the circumstances that led to imprisonment.

Third, institutional processes matter. Narratives indicate that investigation practices, dispossession, and procedural delays can deepen harm and extend the consequences of accusation and detention. Prison experiences were described as primarily punitive, with limited rehabilitation and inconsistent protection from exploitation. Comparable Pakistani research links such harms to confession-based policing, limited forensic capacity, and normalized impunity, while also tracing these patterns to longer colonial legacies of policing and governance (Khan & Ullah, 2026; Khan et al., 2023).

Together, these mechanisms suggest a trauma-to-prison-to-marginalization pipeline: gendered violence and structural insecurity increase exposure to criminalization; punitive practices deepen harm during incarceration; and post-release stigma and exclusion undermine desistance and re-entry. Policy responses, therefore, must be integrated across protection, justice, incarceration, and reintegration systems.

6. Policy implications

Based on participants' narratives and the cross-case analysis, four policy domains require priority attention:

Gender-responsive protection and policing: strengthen mechanisms for early response to domestic and sexual violence; improve complaint handling; standardize gender-sensitive arrest and interrogation protocols; and strengthen oversight to reduce coercion, corruption, and dispossession during investigations. (Khan et al., 2023; Khan & Ullah, 2026).

Access to legal aid and timely justice: expand legal aid for women at early stages of criminal proceedings; reduce procedural delays; and strengthen safeguards against prolonged pre-trial detention. Alternatives to incarceration should be prioritized where appropriate, especially for women whose involvement is shaped by coercion or low legal awareness.

Prison conditions and rehabilitation: improve healthcare, hygiene, privacy protections, and complaint mechanisms in women's prisons; expand market-linked vocational training; and integrate trauma-informed counseling and parenting support.

Structured reintegration support: implement 'throughcare' programs that provide time-bound cash assistance, safe accommodation, psychosocial support, and employment linkage. Formalize

state–civil society partnerships (including referral pathways to organizations such as WAT) and invest in community sensitization to reduce stigma.

7. Limitations and future research

This study is based on a small qualitative sample of seven women accessed through snowball sampling and therefore does not claim statistical generalizability. The narratives nevertheless provide analytically rich insight into mechanisms and experiences that are under-documented in Pakistan.

Future work could broaden the sample across provinces, offense types, and post-release durations; incorporate institutional perspectives (police, prison administration, courts); and evaluate the effectiveness of reintegration programs and civil society partnerships to identify scalable interventions that reduce recidivism and protect women's rights.

8. Conclusion

Using Gendered Pathways Theory and narrative interviews with seven former prisoners from Adiala Jail, this paper shows that women's pathways into crime in Pakistan are deeply shaped by gendered violence, coercion, deception, and structural insecurity, and that post-release reintegration is constrained by stigma, livelihood precarity, and weak institutional support.

Policy reforms that focus narrowly on incarceration without addressing violence prevention, legal aid, prison conditions, and reintegration support are unlikely to reduce harm or recidivism. A gender-responsive criminal justice approach—implemented through coordinated state and civil society action—remains essential to protect women's dignity and enable sustainable reintegration.

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Supplementary Appendix A. Extended narrative accounts (from dissertation Theme 1)

The following extended accounts reproduce the dissertation's Theme 1 narrative material for each participant (pseudonyms). In a journal submission, this appendix can be provided as online supplementary material if needed.

Zahida

Zahida, a 56-year-old woman convicted of murdering her husband, shared that she experienced domestic and sexual violence for more than twenty years in her marriage. She also shared that she asked for help from her family members and community, and after listening to her and accepting her as a victim of domestic and sexual violence, they asked her husband to stop this behavior or else leave her. Her husband didn't agree to leave her and took her to an area far away from her family and that community. She was advised to leave him, but she feared that if she got divorced, her children would suffer. Gender Strain theory claims that the strain created by society due to gendered norms and lack of choices for women leads them to commit a crime, and if those factors are not removed, rehabilitation is affected, and the chances of recidivism increase (Barlow, 2014). Here, Zahida was given two choices: one to leave her husband and live at her uncle's home with her five children, which would have increased the chances of her dependency and taking a lifetime of favor from her relatives, which would have affected her children's self-esteem and created another factor of shame or stigma in society for her. She refused to get that extra favor because in the past she had experienced the shame born out of her husband's misconduct with their relatives.

She refused the offer, claiming not to disturb her relatives, who were just good people helping and supporting her; she didn't want to create a disturbance for them. So, she went with her husband, but her husband continued the violence. She said that they moved to a rented house, and he felt completely free to do as he pleased. She shared that he beat her every day. She said, Relation theory suggests that a woman's pathway towards crime is different from men, and it's because of her relations that she tries not to indulge in crime; her roles as mother, daughter, and wife keep her docile, connected, and away from criminal tendencies (Barlow, 2014). Here, Zahida proved through her constant efforts to save her family by remaining silent, enduring pain and violence, just to keep her family structure intact and to save her children's self-esteem by letting them live with their father. But, when the same father became a threat to their children, she shared that her patience ended and at first she decided to commit suicide but thinking of her daughters who were her husband's next target as her daughters told her that they were being verbally and sexually harassed by their own biological father, she said she decided to take the step, which she confessed was not right in her eyes, but she claimed that she had no other option. She shared,

The Gendered Pathways theory, which maintains that women rarely commit crimes without being driven by a combination of abuse, trauma, and systemic oppression, is highlighted by this horrible incident. Until circumstances force them to choose between committing a crime and continuing to live with injustices, women often endure violence in silence.

She remained silent for more than two decades, driven by a deep sense of helplessness in a patriarchal system that offered no assistance, as well as a desire to protect her honor and the lives of her children. But her endurance peaked the night she made the decision to act. Her dignity had been completely undermined after being stripped, humiliated, and beaten once more. When her husband started abusing their daughters, the violence spread beyond her, and she had no other option—moral, emotional, or social. This murder was the result of desperation brought on by institutional weakness, structural neglect, and ongoing domestic abuse rather than innate criminal intent. This aligns with the Gendered Pathways perspective, which

emphasizes that women's criminality is often a last resort, shaped by survival, oppression, and the absence of avenues for protection or justice.

She shared further,

She shared that the next morning, after one of the beatings, her husband left the house. She went to the market with her daughter and bought a knife, asking the shopkeeper to sharpen both edges. That evening, when her husband returned home, she said he again beat her mercilessly. This Time, he even warned her that he would call her mother to show her condition, humiliating her further. She said that she was tortured again that night as he used a green plastic pipe, cut to a yard and a half, and folded double, to strike her. She shared that he dragged her by the hair and kicked her in the stomach with such force that the marks lasted for over a year. She said she was in such a condition that she could not even stand. Despite the lack of energy in her body that night, she said she struck him. She had hidden the knife and stood silently against the wall. As he came toward her in rage, she slashed him across the stomach. "I did not stop," she said. "Even when he pleaded, I kept stabbing until he stopped breathing. These drug-addicted men… they only know how to talk. They cannot act. He could not even defend himself." She shared with a mixture of anger, hatred, and helplessness in her voice. She endured physical and emotional pain for twenty years for her children, and when she got the hint that her daughters were going to be her husband's next target, she decided to end his life. She was not proud to do that; she confessed to having done wrong, but she also shared that she had no other option. She shared that she couldn't report her case to the police because there were her husband's friends in the Police, and she wanted to avoid the stigma attached to reporting and going to the police station. To defend herself and to save her children from violence, she killed her husband.

When she committed the crime, she went to her uncles; she shared everything with them, and she said no one questioned him, because everyone knew. The statement suggests that, despite being aware of everything, society chooses to remain quiet or stay away from the matter. Her statement also indicates that when she told everyone everything, and no one did anything to save her, now, when she did something, everyone stayed quiet because they knew that they had no right to say anything, and they couldn't do anything, as no one could change what had happened. Zahida's story is an example of dependency and domestic violence, showing that a woman tries not to get involved in violent crimes, but when her dignity and survival are hit again and again, and she has nowhere to go, and asking for help gets so difficult, she reacts(Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004). Her word, "No one said a word to me, because everyone already knew", show criminal negligence from our society when it comes to a matter of husband and wife, they often refuse to get involve and if they do, like her cousins, they can do nothing to keep her safe, they sent her with him despite knowing how ruthless he was with her. It's a lifetime of trauma that a woman experiences, first at her home, then in prison, and after that, living with titles like 'murderer' and 'ex-convict'.

Nargis

Zahida's story shows a woman in pain and struggling to deal with domestic violence daily. Nargis's story shows a different but equally disturbing scenario, where she was constantly being harassed and stalked by a young boy in her in-laws. She shared, "He used to follow me. He would call me from different numbers and say things like, "I've fallen in love with you. Leave your children and come with me." At that time, she was thirty years old and had five children. She told her husband and her father-in-law about the young man stalking and harassing her, but they neglected it, saying, "He's just a kid. Don't overthink it". It was a matter of the intimate family, and they considered him young and non-serious, thinking he wouldn't do anything. She kept

avoiding him. He used to come to their house with his mother, used to call her through different mobile numbers, and he finally broke into her house when she was alone and tried to impose his will on her by showing her the gun and saying he would kill himself if she didn't agree to be with him. She tried to stop him, and in doing so, the gun fired, and he was accidentally killed. She spoke with dismay in her voice about society; who would have believed her? She was defending herself and her dignity, but everything got ruined for someone else's forced lust and will. She said,

She shared that her life was shattered into pieces due to that incident. She was of the view that if a person living peacefully, minding their own business, an accident gets them into prison and changes their life trajectory, it ruins every bit of their life, from their routines to their relations and belonging. Nargis said, "I used to think why it happened to me, I was living peacefully, I never had bad intentions for anyone, neither for that guy (who blackmailed her), I had children, I had a home, I was busy with them. Then why did it happen to me? Then I thought maybe it's destiny, but it still hurts. I ruined my whole life, only God and I know what I endured in those 5 ½ years, completely abandoned." Her statement, "Why did it happen to her?" indicates that she was a passive participant in her own story; she had little to no agency, and when she tried to say 'No' to a guy, he forced his will. In that very moment, she was thinking about society. In the end, when everything happened, when she couldn't comprehend it, she accepted it as her destiny, but the Gendered Pathways Theory explains this phenomenon, claiming that most of the women resist crime, due to their docile and sensitive nature and the close familial bonds as their roles in society as a woman, but when they commit a crime, it is mostly driven by gendered factors (Barlow, 2014). Here, Nargis couldn't speak up due to her husband's honor, for her children, and avoided the situation, which turned into an accident resulting in a murder. She explained,

Nargis is 42 years old now. She shared that she lost precious years of her life in prison, she lost her peaceful home and a settled life, she still suffers, and all of this is for saying 'NO' to a guy who claimed to love her and wanted her at any cost. She said she never wanted to be with him; she was happily living in her home with her children. She refused to get engaged in an extramarital relationship, and she faced humiliation, stigma, the tag of 'murderer', and was imprisoned just for a man's ego. When someone doesn't intend to commit a crime and ends up in prison. No one can imagine their pain and suffering, especially when they are women.

Rabail

Rabail suffered from this pain as well. She got trapped in a crime scene planned by her step-uncles, and just her presence at the scene became her fault. She became suspicious and was forced to admit what she never did or even imagined doing. She came to Rawalpindi via Daewoo and went straight to the hospital, where her paternal uncles asked her to go rest at home. When she stepped inside her mother's home, she saw her stepfather's dead body. As she was the first one to step in after the murder, the police caught her and charged her with murdering her stepfather. She explained getting trapped in a plan, in her words, as

The statement underscores the profound sense of helplessness Rabail experienced as a woman within a patriarchal context, where she was coerced by men into taking responsibility for a crime she did not commit. The threat to strip her clothes if she refused further illustrates how, within patriarchal structures, women are systematically deprived of agency and subjected to gendered forms of violence and humiliation. This episode reflects the broader maxim that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely—particularly when wielded in institutions that lack accountability. Despite neither intending to nor being involved in any criminal act, Rabail was forced to endure the violence of police custody and prolonged imprisonment while awaiting trial, simply to prove her innocence. Her experience poses a critical challenge to the legitimacy of the

criminal justice system, revealing how unchecked police authority disproportionately victimizes women and perpetuates cycles of injustice.

She said that the nightmare began with the arrest of her entire family.

But the police did not listen. Instead, they stormed her house, ransacked every room, and stripped it bare. “They took everything,” she recalled bitterly. “My jewelry was ripped from my ears, my bangles pulled off so violently that I never got them back.” The brutality was relentless. Officers dragged her by the hair, beat her, and threatened to strip her if she refused to confess. “Imagine ten men standing in front of a woman, saying they will strip her, burn her body with cigarettes, do whatever they want. Of course, that woman will say, ‘Yes, I have committed ten murders.’” With tears in her eyes, she explained how she surrendered to their demands: “I said, ‘Don’t hurt me. Yes, I did it.’ I still have that document where I denied everything at first, but in the end, I admitted to crimes I never committed.”

She described the day her stepfather was killed. At the time, she was in Lahore. She had received a call that her sister was being operated on and rushed back to Rawalpindi by bus—her ticket proving that she was nowhere near the scene of the murder. When she returned, she went straight to the hospital, then home to cook soup for her sister, as her mother had asked. But when she entered the house, she was met with a foul smell. She followed it to her stepfather’s room, and there, in the darkness, her foot slipped on something sticky. When she switched on the light, she froze. His dead body lay in front of her. She screamed, and within moments, her step-uncles entered the room.

She went on to explain how her life unraveled long before that day. Her father had been a successful businessman. “We had everything,” she said quietly. “Cars, jewelry, a beautiful home. He brought money home in bags. But he gave us everything except education. That is my biggest regret.” After her father’s divorce, her mother married his best friend—her stepfather. With him came betrayal, financial ruin, and family conflict. She openly disliked him, and her step-uncles used that against her.

The imprisonment destroyed what little she had left. Her love marriage, once her source of strength, ended in divorce. “He said I was not pure anymore,” she recalled bitterly. “When a woman marries for love, nothing else matters. But when she is wrongfully accused, what is left after that?

Looking back, she could only sum up her suffering with one lesson: “All of this was done for money. Money is the root of all evil. If someone earns well, they should protect it and, above all, educate their children. Otherwise, people can go to any level to snatch your happiness.”

Rabail shared that she still feels the pain of being charged with a crime she never committed. A person living a straight and simple life, deceived by relatives and trapped in a plan, their lives get traumatized and suffer from an unfamiliar pain and grievances. She told with a lot of pain in her voice that,

In Rabail’s case, policemen were involved with the criminals; they forced a woman to confess to a crime she never committed, they fabricated false evidence, and they put her mother and sister in prison as well. Her marriage ended in divorce, for which she waited ten years before marrying the man she liked. This stigma and forceful conviction transformed her from a strong, independent woman to a dependent, helpless woman striving daily to survive. She never committed the crime for which she was sentenced and punished. Feminist criminology emphasizes the need to examine the gendered experiences and circumstances of women who become entangled in the criminal justice system. It argues that women’s treatment within this system must account for the unique forms of victimization, social control, and structural inequalities that shape their lives. Unlike men, women often face lifelong repercussions that

extend beyond their prison sentence; once a woman enters prison, her life trajectory is profoundly and often irreversibly altered in negative ways.

Cases such as Rabail's exemplify how women, despite their innocence, can be drawn into the justice system due to systemic loopholes, patriarchal practices, and coercive policing. Their imprisonment represents not merely a legal injustice but also a social and personal one, as the stigma of incarceration persists even after acquittal. For such women, leaving prison does not signify the end of punishment. Rather, they continue to bear the burden of wrongful incarceration, enduring the social exclusion, reputational damage, and personal loss that follow them indefinitely.

Fakhra

Fakhra's case is also an example of a woman entangled in a web of relationship with husband and children, being uneducated and unskilled, she was more dependent on her husband, and her husband accidently killed her owner's wife, their owner was a very influential person and when her mother and relatives refused to support her, she said she had no other option but to live with him to support her children by hiding his crime. She said that she and her husband had been working as house help for an influential family, living in their servant quarters with their three children. The lady of the house was known for her strictness and constant taunts. "She would humiliate us over the smallest things," she said. One day, while her husband was working in the garden with a sickle, the lady began yelling at him again, mocking his background and telling him that people like them had no worth. Hurt and humiliated, her husband, in a moment of anger, flung the sickle against the wall. But it struck her instead.

Confused and terrified, she followed his instructions. Without gathering any belongings, they fled. Her mother refused to shelter them, fearing the wrath of their influential employer. For ten years, they lived on the run, hiding from the law, moving from one city to another. During that time, she gave birth to two more children, constantly fearing for their safety.

When the police finally caught them, everything they owned was taken in front of their eyes. "They ransacked our home, they even took the glass jar where I used to save money," she recounted. "They said, 'It happens during investigation.' They took our television and other household items, too. By the time I was released, we had nothing left—we had to start from scratch." It was only after their arrest that she learned the shocking truth: the lady had not died from her husband's sickle, but from bullets. "I was shaken to the core. My husband never had a gun. I didn't hear any fire that day. Later, we discovered that our owner had enemies over land disputes. He got his land back by settling the case with them, but everything was pinned on my husband." She was not trying to defend her husband.

Her voice broke as she remembered the court's decision. She was sentenced to 25 years, the same as someone who commits murder. Later, it was reduced to 12 years. "

She herself suffered physically and emotionally in prison. The stress of her children's safety gave her heart problems; she contracted tuberculosis but continued to work inside the prison despite doctors'' recommendations to rest.

Her marriage, too, collapsed under the weight of her incarceration. "It was his fault that brought us here, yet in the end, he divorced me," she said bitterly. "My children and I suffered, while he walked away."

When she was finally released, she stepped into a world that offered no support. "No one cared how I was living," she said. "The government knew my situation, but no one helped. We rented a single room, and my sons became daily wage workers. There were days we had nothing to eat and slept on empty stomachs. It took us five years just to reach a simple, basic life, and even today, we struggle."

Her sons never received a proper education because they had to work to support their family. One of them learned magic tricks and dreams of starting his own business, but he lacks the money to set it up. "Whatever he earns goes into paying rent for the props he borrows," she explained. She paused, then said firmly: "We are still struggling to settle in our lives. We need support from the government. Even small loans would help—we can pay them back, but we need financial assistance to rebuild. I request, through your work, that the government support those who come out of prison. We women suffer more than anyone else. Without help, we cannot stand on our own."

Fakhra's narrative exemplifies the gendered vulnerabilities of women who become entangled in crime not through their own direct actions, but through the coercion, dependency, or influence of intimate partners. Her story reflects how structural inequalities, patriarchal norms, and socio-economic limitations shape women's pathways to incarceration. In Fakhra's case, her financial and emotional dependence on her husband constrained her choices, as leaving him would have meant jeopardizing her children's well-being, a fear that ultimately materialized. She admitted that she was aware of the wrongdoing but emphasized that she did not deserve the death sentence for her complicity, particularly as she had five children depending on her.

Her statement highlights a crucial dimension of feminist criminology: the need to contextualize women's involvement in crime within the broader framework of gendered power relations, social expectations, and systemic inequities. Fakhra herself acknowledged that, had she been economically independent, she would not have supported her husband in concealing his crime. This underscores how a lack of education, financial autonomy, and awareness renders women more vulnerable to manipulation and coercion by male partners, eventually leading to their criminalization and imprisonment.

Such cases demand a differentiated approach within the criminal justice system, one that recognizes the intersection of gender, poverty, and dependency in shaping women's choices and actions. Treating women like Fakhra identically to men disregards the structural and relational contexts that lead them to crime. Instead, justice mechanisms must adopt gender-sensitive policies that account for women's caregiving responsibilities, economic precarity, and lack of agency, ensuring that punishment does not reproduce or intensify cycles of marginalization.

Kausar

She began her story with a sigh, almost as if she was still trying to understand how her life had turned upside down. "My husband's first wife had filed a maintenance case," she said that her husband had to pay 28,000 rupees every month. She said that he was a hardworking man, a retired dispenser, but it became impossible for him to manage. That's when he started looking for work. He told a friend about his situation, and the friend assured him there was nothing to worry about. He said, 'Oh man, it's no problem. We'll bring Patti—tea—from Peshawar to Lahore. You'll just have to sit with me in the car. Nothing more. Just load and unload the tea.'

When he returned from his first trip, he told me happily that it really was just tea, and with these trips, we could pay back the 200,000 rupees of debt we owed. He was a tall, well-built man, and later he told me the friend wanted him to sit in the car because he looked like an army Major or Colonel. It gave them cover." She paused, then added quietly, "That was the beginning of our destruction." Her younger brother ran a small video game shop. When he heard that her husband was going to Peshawar, he asked to join, thinking he could buy stock for his shop and save travel costs. Around the same time, her younger sister's wedding was near. She too decided to accompany them, hoping to buy dowry items at cheaper rates.

At the police checkpoint, everything changed. "When they stopped us and asked what we were carrying, my husband replied honestly, 'Tea.' He had no idea. None of us did. But when the police

checked the car, they found drugs hidden under the seats and inside the doors." Her voice trembled. "That's how we got stuck unknowingly. We were living a respectable life. My husband had built a small medical store with his retirement money. He was earning well. If those financial pressures had not come, he would never have gone looking for extra work. Friends can destroy your wrong friends, and you lose everything. We lost our honor, our respect."

She vividly recalled the shock of that moment. She said that at the checkpoint, she had no idea what was happening. Her brother was still a minor. He couldn't comprehend it either. She was in shock, thinking that she had just come along to buy things for her sister's wedding. She said that they were staring in disbelief while the police kept saying, 'You knew everything.' But we didn't."

The cruelty of the process hit her next.

This narrative highlights how women's involvement in crime often emerges from structural inequalities and relational contexts rather than deliberate criminal intent, aligning with the Gendered Pathways Theory. The woman entered the criminal justice system not through independent decision-making, but rather due to her husband's economic strain, his friend's influence, and her role as a supportive wife and sister. Her presence in the car was tied to socially constructed responsibilities — arranging her sister's dowry and accompanying family members — reflecting how women's caregiving and relational duties can inadvertently place them at risk of entanglement in criminal activities.

The story also reveals a lack of awareness and power in decision-making. She neither knew about the drugs nor the legal implications of being present during the transport, yet she bore equal consequences. This reflects the gendered vulnerability the theory emphasizes: women are often collateral participants, implicated because of familial or relational ties, with limited agency in preventing or contesting the circumstances. Her shock at learning about the severity of the charge (9C) further illustrates how systemic and informational barriers leave women particularly disadvantaged once caught in the justice system.

Finally, the case underscores the compounded consequences women face, where social respectability, economic survival, and family ties intersect to create unintended pathways to incarceration. Her reliance on her husband's choices, her caregiving roles, and trust in male relatives and friends align with Daly's framework of "relational pathways," showing how women's roles as wives, daughters, and sisters expose them to criminal liability despite the absence of direct criminal intent.

Natasha

In cases of 9C, the gangs and the agents look for innocent people to shield themselves from getting caught. Natasha, a simple woman living with her family of two children and husband, who was a daily wager, said that one of the agents (a female) befriended her by visiting her home on a daily basis to do stitching and embroidery work. After examining her daily routine and finances closely, she offered to drive her out of the city in a car, and in return, she would receive money. She needed money at that time, and she shared this with her husband, who ignored the offer; however, she went for the sake of the money. When they got caught, they blamed Natasha and made a deal with the police. The reason they kept Natasha with them was that if they got caught at any point, they could get her to the front by putting all the blame on her and escape, as the police must provide names if anything like that happens.

She began by explaining how it all started with a friend she trusted. "With me was that friend of mine and one of her companions," she recalled. The friend had insisted that her companion would accompany them out of the city so that the women would not be alone. Believing this, she

agreed. She was carrying her child in her lap, sitting in the front car, while her friend and the companion followed behind in another vehicle.

When they reached the motorway checkpoint, she did exactly what she had been instructed. "I told the police I was taking the child to the village," she said. But then the search began. To her horror, the police uncovered a large quantity of drugs hidden in the car. She froze. "I had no idea what had just happened to me. I was so scared and anxious," she recounted. In the chaos, the driver offered the police officers five lakh rupees and quickly disappeared. The entire blame, however, fell squarely on her shoulders.

She remembered sitting in the holding cell, receiving messages from her friend assuring her that they would get her released. But no one came. It was only after being sent to jail that the truth became clear.

Cases under Section 9C of the Control of Narcotics Substances Act are particularly critical in understanding women's pathways into crime and their risks after incarceration. Many women are first entrapped into drug-related offences through manipulation, coercion, or misplaced trust, as seen in several narratives. Once convicted, these women often face offers from organized gangs who promise protection, financial support, and a sense of belonging upon their release. This creates a dangerous cycle where women who were initially accidental or peripheral actors in crime are systematically pushed into deeper and more permanent involvement in illicit networks.

This phenomenon is not limited to narcotics cases. Women imprisoned for serious offences such as murder are also identified as targets by gangs, as their incarceration marks them as "hardened" or "experienced," making them more valuable for recruitment. Importantly, it is the most vulnerable women—those with limited familial support, economic insecurity, or histories of trauma—who become primary targets for these networks. From a gendered pathways perspective, this underscores how structural inequalities and gendered vulnerabilities not only shape women's entry into crime but also expose them to cycles of exploitation even after punishment. Therefore, women whose offences are rooted in manipulation or accidental involvement must be distinguished and treated differently within the justice system, both to acknowledge their circumstances and to prevent their further entrapment in organized crime.

Faiza

She lived in a small village with her daughter and mother after separating from her husband. Their survival depended on a small piece of land, about three Marla, attached to their house. On that land, she grew vegetables, her only source of income, as she was neither educated nor skilled in any other profession. Without a male member in the house to support them, this land was their lifeline.

A landlord in the village wanted to buy her land, but the Price he offered was unreasonable. She refused, determined to keep the only means of living for her family. But her refusal came at a cost. One day, while she was working on her land, a group of men arrived, including the landlord's brother. They threatened her, saying that if she didn't agree to sell, they would take the land by force and drive her out of the village. When she resisted, one of them misbehaved with her, tearing her shirt from the back. Overwhelmed with humiliation and anger, she picked up a stone and threw it, hitting the landlord's brother on the head.

That single act changed her life forever. The men immediately called the police, and an FIR for attempted murder was filed against her. She was locked up for three months. During this Time, her mother and daughter were not allowed to see her. The police threatened that she would rot in prison for the rest of her life. In her absence, the men forcefully occupied her land. The village

turned against her—her family was boycotted, relatives cut ties, and she was branded a "bad woman."

After her release, with no land, no money, and no social support, she had no choice but to leave her village. She moved to the city with her daughter and mother. Life there was equally difficult; bills and the meager earnings from working as house help left them barely surviving. She could not afford her daughter's education, but at least she felt her daughter was safe away from the hostility of the village.

Her voice carries the weight of betrayal and injustice. Three months in lockup had cost her not only her land and dignity but also her social standing and her child's future. Even after leaving prison, the punishment never ended. Society had marked her, and survival became her only fight.