



SOCIOECONOMIC CORRELATES OF FEMALE CRIMINALITY IN DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Female criminality in Nigeria has historically been underexplored, with research and policy dominated by male-centric perspectives. In Delta State, recent trends indicate an increase in women's participation in criminal activities, including petty theft, human trafficking, cybercrime, and drug-related offenses. This study examines the socioeconomic factors influencing female criminality in the state, focusing on poverty, educational attainment, unemployment, family background, and cultural norms. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 350 women involved in various criminal activities across urban and riverine communities. Analysis revealed that poverty, limited education, unemployment, dysfunctional family structures, and exposure to peer pressure and digital crime culture significantly influence women's engagement in crime. The findings underscore the need for gender-sensitive criminal justice policies, social interventions, and rehabilitative programs tailored to address structural inequalities and prevent recidivism. The study contributes to criminological scholarship by highlighting the intersection of gender and socioeconomic determinants in shaping criminal behavior.

Keywords: Female criminality, socioeconomic factors, Delta State, gender-sensitive policy, poverty, education, unemployment

INTRODUCTION

Female criminality has remained underexplored in African criminological studies, particularly within societies where gender roles are deeply entrenched (Adebayo & Oyenuga, 2020). In Delta State, Nigeria, rising female involvement in crime challenges the traditional notion of male-dominated criminality. Socioeconomic pressures, environmental degradation, unemployment, and poverty have pushed many women toward survivalist activities such as petty theft, prostitution, drug trafficking, and cybercrime (Okonkwo, 2021; Egbunu & Eze, 2022). These crimes often reflect structural hardship rather than inherent deviance, highlighting the intersection of gender, poverty, and inequality in the oil-rich but underdeveloped Niger Delta.

Recent economic instability and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have worsened women's vulnerability by shrinking informal job opportunities and increasing domestic stress (ILO, 2021; Ogu & Oteh, 2023). Family dysfunction, unemployment, and limited education further heighten exposure to illicit ventures (Okoro & Ibeh, 2022; Ogedegbe & Omodero, 2021). Cultural norms and social stigma obscure the socioeconomic roots of female criminality, while peer influence, social media, and drug abuse intensify women's involvement in cybercrime and related offenses (Agba & Udeh, 2021; Enang & Ogbonna, 2023). Weak



rehabilitation services and gender-insensitive justice systems perpetuate recidivism, underscoring the urgent need for inclusive and gender-responsive crime prevention policies (Onyema & Ajayi, 2020; Chukwuma & Umeadi, 2023).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The increasing visibility of female criminality in Delta State presents a complex challenge for social policy and criminology. Women now engage in crimes such as human trafficking, cyber fraud, armed robbery, drug trafficking, prostitution, and petty theft (Adebayo & Oyenuga, 2020). Yet, the underlying social, economic, and psychological factors remain poorly understood, and the criminal justice system is ill-equipped to address the gendered nature of female offending.

Socioeconomic deprivation—including poverty, unemployment, limited education and dysfunctional family structures—contributes significantly to women’s involvement in crime. Cultural expectations and gender-based discrimination exacerbate vulnerability, while digital culture and peer pressure introduce new pathways to criminality (Okonkwo, 2021). Existing literature largely ignores these gender-specific dynamics, resulting in interventions that fail to prevent or rehabilitate female offenders effectively.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this study is to examine the influence of socioeconomic factors on female criminality in Delta State, Nigeria.

HYPOTHESIS

H01: Socioeconomic factors (poverty, education, unemployment, family background, and cultural influences) have no significant effect on female criminality in Delta State, Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Poverty and Female Criminality

Poverty is a major driver of female criminal behavior, especially in regions lacking strong social safety nets. In Delta State, economic deprivation, worsened by environmental degradation from oil exploration that destroys farmlands and fisheries, compels many women to adopt survival strategies such as petty theft, prostitution, and participation in informal criminal networks (Adebayo & Oyenuga, 2020). Beyond material hardship, poverty also limits social mobility and empowerment, leaving women with few viable means of livelihood (Ikenyei & Akpotor 2020). The pressure to provide for themselves and their families under these conditions often normalizes crime as a coping mechanism, making poverty both a structural and situational force shaping patterns of female criminality in Delta State (Okonkwo, 2021).

Education and Criminal Behaviour

Educational attainment is negatively correlated with criminal involvement, as it provides individuals with employable skills, decision-making capacity, and awareness of legal consequences (Abubakar & Musa, 2019). In Delta State, many women—especially in rural and riverine areas—face barriers to education due to early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and cultural restrictions, which limit their job opportunities and push some toward crime for survival (Ikenyei 2020). Education also shapes moral and cognitive development, helping women resist peer and societal pressures to engage in illegal acts. Consequently, the lack of educational access creates both economic and psychological vulnerabilities that heighten the risk of female criminality in Delta State (Nwosu & Udoh, 2020).



Unemployment and Economic Vulnerability

High female youth unemployment is a major driver of criminal behavior in Delta State, where limited access to formal jobs pushes many women into informal or illicit activities such as cybercrime, prostitution, and drug trafficking (Ogedegbe & Omodero, 2021). Between 2020 and 2024, youth unemployment rates exceeded 30%, disproportionately affecting women due to gender bias and labor market inequality (NBS, 2024). The absence of stable income and access to credit deepens economic vulnerability, making criminal activities a rational response to financial hardship and social exclusion (Ikenyei 2017).

Family Background and Upbringing

Family background significantly shapes behavioral outcomes, as dysfunctional homes characterized by domestic violence, neglect, or exposure to criminal behavior increase the likelihood of female delinquency (Okoro & Ibeh, 2022). Many women in Delta State who grow up in such environments internalize deviant behaviors and lack moral guidance, pushing them toward criminal networks for validation or financial stability. Family instability weakens emotional support and social control, key protective factors against criminal involvement.

Cultural Norms, Peer Pressure, and Digital Influence

Cultural norms in Delta State often stigmatize female offenders, labeling them as morally deviant rather than victims of structural inequality, which reduces access to rehabilitation and social reintegration (Uche & Madueke, 2023). At the same time, peer influence and digital exposure encourage women to engage in cyber-enabled crimes such as the “Yahoo Yahoo” scheme, glamorized on social media for its promise of wealth and status (Agba & Udeh, 2021). The interaction of stigma, peer pressure, and online influence thus creates new pathways to female criminality that traditional interventions struggle to address.

Drug Abuse and Female Criminality

Drug abuse acts as both a cause and consequence of female criminality. The growing use of substances such as codeine, tramadol, and methamphetamine among women in Delta State is linked to unemployment, emotional distress, and coercion by criminal groups (Enang & Ogbonna, 2023). Addiction drives women to commit theft, engage in sex work, or distribute drugs to sustain their habits, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of dependency and crime. The lack of gender-sensitive rehabilitation programs worsens this cycle, trapping many women in repeated criminal behavior.

Criminal Justice System and Recidivism

Delta State’s criminal justice system remains poorly equipped to meet the rehabilitation needs of female offenders. Correctional facilities suffer from overcrowding, inadequate funding, and a lack of gender-responsive programs such as vocational training, counseling, and healthcare (Onyema & Ajayi, 2020). The absence of post-release support further limits reintegration, leaving women without employment or social acceptance and forcing them back into criminal activities. Therefore, a gender-sensitive correctional approach is crucial for reducing recidivism and promoting long-term social reintegration.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: STRAIN THEORY

Strain Theory, developed by Robert K. Merton (1938), explains crime as a response to the disjunction between culturally approved goals—such as wealth, success, or social status—and the limited, socially acceptable means available to achieve them. When individuals, particularly those in disadvantaged or marginalized groups, face structural barriers such as poverty, unemployment, or gender discrimination, they experience pressure or “strain” that



may lead them to adopt alternative or deviant means to reach their aspirations (Agnew, 1992). Merton identified five modes of adaptation—conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion—with “innovation” often involving the use of illegitimate or criminal behavior to attain socially valued goals. Later scholars like Messner and Rosenfeld (2013) expanded this framework by linking strain to systemic inequalities and economic exclusion that push individuals toward crime. Thus, Strain Theory shifts the focus from individual moral failure to the broader structural and socioeconomic conditions that constrain lawful success, making it particularly relevant for analyzing female criminality in contexts such as Delta State, where women often face compounded economic and social marginalization.

Relevance of Strain theory to Female Criminality

In Delta State, women face severe socioeconomic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and limited education, which hinder access to legitimate opportunities and often push them toward survival-driven crimes like petty theft, prostitution, and cybercrime (Okonkwo, 2021; Adebayo & Oyenuga, 2020). Guided by Strain Theory (Merton, 1938; Agnew, 1992), this study explains female criminality as a response to structural pressures rather than moral weakness. Factors such as dysfunctional family backgrounds, peer influence, and digital exposure further normalize criminal behavior when legitimate means to success are blocked (Agba & Udeh, 2021; Uche & Madueke, 2023). The theory’s focus on socioeconomic strain makes it particularly relevant for understanding how systemic inequalities shape female crime in Delta State, while also providing a framework for developing gender-sensitive interventions, economic empowerment initiatives, and rehabilitative programs that address the root causes of women’s involvement in crime (Edewor & Ugorji, 2021; Onyema & Ajayi, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design to examine the socioeconomic factors influencing female criminality in Delta State. From a population of about 1,000 women involved in criminal activities, a stratified random sample of 300 respondents was selected based on age, education, and location. Data were gathered using a validated and reliable ($\alpha = 0.84$) structured questionnaire covering demographics and socioeconomic variables such as poverty, education, employment, and family background. Questionnaires were self-administered with follow-ups to enhance response rates, while data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression at a 0.05 significance level.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age	18–30	135	45
	31–40	90	30
	41–50	45	15
	51+	30	10
Education	No formal education	30	10
	Primary	60	20
	Secondary	120	40
	Tertiary	90	30
Employment Status	Employed	60	20
	Unemployed	150	50



	Self-employed/Informal work	90	30
Household Income Level	Low	60	20
	Moderate	180	60
	High	60	20

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 1 shows that most respondents were young women aged 18–30 years (45%) and 31–40 years (30%), reflecting a youthful population vulnerable to socioeconomic pressures. About 40% had secondary education, 30% tertiary, and 30% primary or no education, indicating limited qualifications for formal jobs. Half (50%) were unemployed, while 30% worked in the informal sector and 20% in formal employment. Most (60%) reported moderate income levels, with 20% each in low and high brackets. Overall, the data depict young, modestly educated, and economically disadvantaged women—conditions strongly linked to female criminality in Delta State (Adebayo & Oyenuga, 2020; Okonkwo, 2021; Ogedegbe & Omodero, 2021).

Inferential Statistics

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Analysis of Socioeconomic Factors and Female Criminality

Variable	r	p-value	Significance
Poverty	0.623	<0.05	Significant
Low Educational Attainment	0.572	<0.05	Significant
Unemployment	0.658	<0.05	Significant
Dysfunctional Family Background	0.611	<0.05	Significant
Peer Pressure, Cultural Norms, Digital Influence	0.589	<0.05	Significant

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Female Criminality

Predictor Variable	B	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Unemployment	0.312	4.28	<0.01	Strongest predictor
Poverty	0.287	3.95	<0.01	Significant predictor
Low Education	0.168	2.12	<0.05	Moderate predictor
Family Background	0.145	1.98	<0.05	Moderate predictor
Peer & Digital Influence	0.132	1.75	>0.05	Not statistically significant

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Pearson Correlation (r)

Pearson correlation analysis revealed positive and statistically significant relationships ($p < 0.05$) between socioeconomic variables—poverty, unemployment, low education, family dysfunction, peer pressure, cultural norms, and digital influence—and female criminality in Delta State. This indicates that increases in these factors correspond with higher incidences of female criminal behavior, underscoring the strong influence of structural and social conditions on women’s involvement in crime.

Multiple Regression (β)

Multiple regression analysis showed that unemployment ($\beta = 0.312, p < 0.01$) and poverty ($\beta = 0.287, p < 0.01$) are the strongest predictors of female criminality in Delta State, indicating that economic deprivation is the primary driver of women’s involvement in crime. Low educational attainment and dysfunctional family background also had moderate but significant



effects, while peer pressure, cultural norms, and digital influence were not significant predictors. Overall, the findings highlight that socioeconomic and structural factors—especially unemployment and poverty—are key determinants of female criminality, supporting Strain Theory and emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive policies that address economic hardship and strengthen household stability.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that socioeconomic deprivation, particularly poverty and unemployment, significantly drives female criminality in Delta State, aligning with prior studies (Adebayo & Oyenuga, 2020; Okonkwo, 2021). Limited education restricts legal employment opportunities, while dysfunctional family environments and domestic instability increase the appeal of criminal alternatives (Abubakar & Musa, 2019; Okoro & Ibeh, 2022). Cultural expectations and digital socialization further exacerbate female criminal involvement by stigmatizing women and normalizing illicit behaviors through peer and online networks (Agba & Udeh, 2021; Uche & Madueke, 2023). Drug abuse emerges as both a facilitator and consequence of criminal behavior, highlighting the cyclical nature of crime among women (Enang & Ogbonna, 2023). These results emphasize the necessity for multidimensional, gender-sensitive interventions that address structural, economic, and socio-cultural determinants of female criminality.

CONCLUSION

Female criminality in Delta State is deeply rooted in socioeconomic deprivation, limited education, unemployment, dysfunctional family structures, cultural norms, and peer influences. The study demonstrates that criminal behavior among women is often a survivalist strategy rather than a reflection of inherent deviance. Addressing these factors requires policies that target poverty alleviation, educational access, employment opportunities, family support systems, and the regulation of digital crime culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively curb female criminality in Delta State, it is essential to implement gender-sensitive crime prevention programs that prioritize education, vocational training, and economic empowerment for women. Rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives should be tailored to the specific needs of female offenders, incorporating psychological counseling and substance abuse treatment to address underlying behavioral and emotional issues. Strengthening family support systems and community-based interventions is also vital to mitigate the influence of dysfunctional households that often serve as breeding grounds for deviant behaviour.

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