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Perceived Social Determinants of Women Criminality in Informal Settlements in Kiambu County, Kenya

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Abstract:

There is an inclination of there being more men than women in prisons despite the point that most incarcerated men have close women allies in crime. This social collaboration suggests the existence of relatively similar numbers of men and women criminality with more protective dynamics that keep women offenders away from contact with law enforcement officers. The presence of unprosecuted female offenders in the general population poses the risk of the propagation of criminal activities in society through social interaction. To mitigate this trajectory, there was a need to examine perceived social determinants of women's criminality in informal settlements in Kiambu County in Kenya. The study employed the descriptive survey research design. A sample of 380 respondents was selected using purposive sampling, proportionate sampling, and simple random sampling techniques from a population of 40,050 residents of the informal settlements. Questionnaires and focus group discussion guides were used to collect the required data. The chi-square test statistics, frequencies and percentages were adopted for data analysis. The findings indicated that family structure, marital status, alcohol and drug abuse, peer pressure, level of education, cultural norms and media exposure were determinants of women's criminality. It was recommended that Law enforcement officers consider eradicating the use and misuse of alcohol and drugs in an attempt to curb women criminality in informal settlements; women in informal settlements consider living within family structure setups in order to mitigate the tendencies of engaging in criminal activities and policymakers in the ministry of education to initiate programs aimed at increasing literacy levels and reinforcing value-based cultural practices among women in informal settlements.

Keywords: Criminology, informal settlement, social determinants, women criminality

1. Introduction

Women criminality is rife in informal settlements, possibly proliferated by virtue of social interactions and sustained by the inability to identify and incriminate the women culprits. While women offenders pass as innocent residents in the informal settlements, the eventual increase in their proportionate numbers poses a profound threat to security management. Munana (2019) suggest that the failure of police officers to take legal action against women who commit crimes in informal settlements creates a favourable environment for women to participate in crime without any fear of apprehension. Laxity, inaction of law enforcement officers and delayed responses to emergency situations make women feel that they must take matters into their own hands for self-protection, which may involve criminal activities (Ali, 2020). These dynamics of policing in informal settlements reaffirm the conclusions reached by Sanchez and Cruz (2023) that women in informal settlements prefer reporting crime to the existing criminal gangs rather than reporting to the police. Women criminality begins with the kind of socialization within the family structure. Families in informal settlements are associated with inadequate parental supervision, dysfunctional families, single parenthood, disorderly parents, and ineffectual skills used for parenting, resulting in delinquency (Akers & Jennings, 2019). The girl child in such family dynamics learns to conceal the delinquent behaviour, thus remaining a covert offender. The influence of women criminality by the family intimate members can be further explained by the social learning theory which argue that women get involved in criminal activity as a result of their association with other criminals (Akers & Jensen, 2017). In addition, Rodriguez (2018) argues that women criminality is associated with socialization of individuals and their subsequent development of the criminal behavior. This is a clear indication that family structure has either a positive or negative influence on an individual's behaviour.

The dysfunctional family settings in informal settlements give women a criminality model resulting in crime, which is considered a desirable pursuit or justified based on specific circumstances (Boman, Mowen & Higgins, 2019). As a result, women develop beliefs that are favorable to criminal activity. This implies that women who associate with family members or are raised by parents who are criminals are likely to engage in criminal activities. Family structure in informal

settlements is characterized by abusive parents, large family size and broken family ties, which contributes to ineffective parenting. (Bezin, Verdier & Zenou, 2022). Teasdale and Bradley (2017) noted that the criminal behavior is learned similarly to learning how to conform to acceptable behavior since it is done through exposure to others behavior or by association with others. The association with members of family members who have a history of crime commission is considered the primary influence of crime among women in informal settlements (Akers & Jennings, 2015). Therefore, it is agreeable that the negative association of women with intimate family members influences women to crime commission. More women in informal settlements are single, separated or divorced and spend more time in situations that might lead them to crime (Abdel-Rahman, Khater & Abdel Fattah, 2023). Maina, Ushie and Kabiru (2020) further postulate that these women who are not married may find themselves in the company of peer friends who might encourage them to commit crimes. Marriage helps to reduce crime because a complete family increases self-control, and women have a habit of thinking about how their partners might respond (Luningham, Merrilees, Taylor, Goeke-Morey, Shirlow, Wentz & Cummings, 2021). This illustrates that married women are less expected to be involved in criminal activities than single women.

The absence of social cohesion weakens informal social control mechanisms (Kyed, 2019). Morgner, Ambole, Anditi and Githira (2020) further postulate that in communities where there is little unity, monitoring and policing of community norms and behaviors become less effective, creating a vacuum in which criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, theft, or prostitution become more prevalent, and women feel compelled to participate due to lack of accountability. Patel and Gleason (2018) reaffirm this argument by stating that social cohesion vulnerability further erodes the support networks that could otherwise provide essential safeguards against criminal involvement. Cultural norms and values have a substantial impact on women's involvement in criminal activities within informal settlements (Moriconi, 2018). This statement is supported by Katzenstein (2018), who argues that norms and values deeply ingrained in the social fabric of informal communities often shape women's roles, expectations and opportunities in ways that can perpetuate criminal behaviour. The cultural acceptance or tolerance of particular criminal activities can also shape women's involvement in criminal activities (Ferrell, 2017). For instance, involvement in the drug trade or prostitution may be more acceptable within certain communities, leading some women to view these activities as viable options, particularly when more conventional employment is scarce.

The discrimination faced by women in informal settlements deprives them of equal access to employment, education and housing (Moagi, Wyatt, Mokgobi, Loeb, Zhang & Davhana-Maselesele, 2018). Blaustein, Pino and Ellison (2018) further assert that employers may be biased against women residing in informal settlements, perpetuating a cycle of unemployment and economic instability. Such exclusion and prejudice lead to a sense of hopelessness and frustration, thus driving women to defy societal norms and turn to crime. Discrimination within the educational system limits educational opportunities, trapping them in a cycle of limited knowledge and skill acquisition for women in informal settlements (Simiyu, Cairncross & Swilling, 2019). This is an illustration that the absence of quality education contributes to crime commissions among women since crime seems to be a more attractive means of securing financial resources. According to Sen (2018), women in informal settings are more susceptible to the influence of criminal networks as this provides them with a sense of belonging and an opportunity to escape the isolation imposed by societal discrimination. As a result, women may seek support from criminal networks as an alternative means of protection and social connection. Arisukwu, Igbolekwu, Oye, Oyeyipo, Asamu, Rasak and Oyekola (2020) suggest that discrimination contributes to the disintegration of community bonds and support systems. These weakened social networks leave women feeling isolated, which drives them to criminal involvement as a coping mechanism or a sense of belonging. This study is, therefore, paramount to examine the perceived social determinants of women criminality in informal settlements in Kiambu County in Kenya.

2. Objective

The main objective of the study was to examine perceived social determinants of women criminality in informal settlements in Kiambu County in Kenya.

3. Methodology

This study adopted the descriptive survey research design. The population of the study was 40,050 residents of informal settlements in Kiambu County, Kenya. A sample of 380 respondents was selected through purposive, proportionate and simple random sampling techniques. Questionnaires for residents and focus group discussion guides were used to collect data. The focus groups consisted of religious leaders, area managers, police officers and reformed women offenders. The reliability of the research instruments was estimated using Cronbach coefficient Alpha, whose value was 0.786, thus sufficient for the instruments to be deemed reliable. Data were analyzed using chi-square test statistics, percentages and frequencies with the aid of SPSS version 25.0. The hypothesis was tested at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. and the information obtained from data analysis is presented in tables and in prose narration.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the data analysis were presented and discussed as follows:

4.1. Demographic Information of the Respondents

The respondents were required to indicate their gender. From data analysis, the female respondents were 43.4%, while the male respondents accounted for 56.6%. The distribution of the respondents by age showed that most respondents were above the age of 40 years (40%). Those between 26-30 years and 32-39 years were 25% each, while

18-25 years constituted 10% of the respondents. Concerning marital status, the results established that 41.1% of the respondents were Single, 42.1% Married, 6.6% Separated and 10.2% Divorced. The study sought information about the highest level of education of the respondents, for which most (42%) had primary school certificates, followed by secondary school certificates (34.5%). Those respondents with college-level certificates constituted 12.6%, and the least number (10.8%) had university education degrees. To determine whether the respondents had enough experience to inform the objective of the study, the number of years lived in the informal settlements was required. The results established that 8% had lived in the informal settlement for 1 year and below, 22% for 11 years and above, 25% for 2-4 years, 24% for 5-7 years and 21% had lived in informal settlement for 8-10 years.

4.2. Perceived Social Determinants of Women Criminality

The study sought to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in the specific perceived social determinants of women criminality based on demographic variables, including gender, age, marital status, level of education, and longevity in informal settlements in Kiambu County in Kenya. A chi-square test was conducted to test the hypothesis at a significance level of $\alpha=0.05$. The findings are represented in table 1.

Perceived Social Determinant of Crime Versus Demographic Variables	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Education Levels	Longevity in Informal Settlement
Family structure as a perceived determinant of women's criminality	.046	.782	.877	.320	.346
Marital status as a perceived determinant of women criminality	.791	.734	.033	.033	.016
Peer influence as a perceived determinant of female criminality	.342	.882	.189	.619	.217
Low level of education as a perceived determinant of women criminality	.053	.882	.256	.748	.115
Drug and alcohol abuse as a perceived determinant of women's criminality	.167	.702	.920	.364	.069
Cultural norms as a perceived determinant of women criminality	.355	.228	.205	.859	.189
Exposure to media content as a perceived determinant of women's criminality	.275	.758	.708	.514	.621

Table 1: Chi-Square Results on Perceived Social Determinant of Women Criminality by Demographic Variables

Information in table 1 shows that there were no statistically significant differences in most of the perceived social determinants of women criminality in informal settlements based on gender, age, marital status, level of education and longevity in informal settlements. However, marital status as a perceived social determinant of women criminality indicated statistically significant differences based on the respondent's demographic variables of marital status, level of education and longevity in informal settlement whose p-values were 0.033, 0.033 and 0.016 respectively. This means that the marital status of a woman determined whether the individual engaged in women's criminality in the informal settlement in Kiambu County in Kenya.

The descriptive statistics were done to indicate the perceived social determinants of women criminality in the informal settlements in Kiambu County in Kenya. The social determinants were measured on a five-level Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The results are represented in table 2 below.

	SA (%)	A (%)	U (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
Family structure influences women to commit crime	55	32.6	3.7	5	3.7
Marital status influences women to engage in crimes	55.8	35.8	3.9	2.6	2.1
Women are influenced by their peers to commit crimes	56.3	35.5	3.7	2.4	2.1
A low level of education influences women to commit crimes.	58.2	32.6	3.2	3.7	2.4
Drug and alcohol abuse cause women to engage in criminality	58.9	31.5	4.5	3.7	2.0
Cultural norms contribute to female criminality	57.4	35	3.2	1.6	2.9
Media content exposure influences women to commit crimes	57.1	32.9	3.9	3.4	2.6

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Perceived Social Determinants of Women Criminality

The findings in table 2 indicate the respondent's responses in percentages based on their level of agreement with statements on perceived social determinants of women criminality in informal settlements in Kiambu County in Kenya. The majority (86.7%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that family structure influenced women to commit crimes. Regarding the statement that marital status influenced women's engagement in crimes, 91.6% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed. The majority (91.8%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that women are influenced by their peers to commit crimes. The study further sought to find out if the level of education influences women's

criminality, and from the responses, it was determined that 93.7% of the respondents indicated to agree or strongly agree. To find out if drug and alcohol abuse caused women to engage in crime, the majority (90.4%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed. To establish if cultural norms contributed to female criminality, 92.4% of the respondents held an affirmative position. Finally, exposure to media content influenced women to commit crimes, as attested to by 90% of the respondents. In essence, family structure, marital status, peers, level of education, drug and alcohol abuse, cultural norms and media content exposure determined women criminality in informal settlements in Kiambu County in Kenya.

Focus group discussions were conducted to triangulate findings from the residents of informal settlements in Kiambu County in Kenya. Qualitative data from focus group discussions were analyzed thematically and presented in prose narration. Respondents were asked to respond to the thematic domain of family structure in relation to women criminality. A Police officer confirmed, *"Ineffective parental supervision of the girls raised in informal settlements and association of women with criminals, especially in the family setup, influences women to engage in crime."* A reformed female criminal resounded, *"As a reformed female criminal, I engaged in crime at a tender age as a result of my association with a relative who was a criminal gang member, and I learned how to commit crime from my relative."* It is evident from the findings of this study that women's criminality is prescribed by varied social determinants. Family structure was perceived as contributing to women criminality a result consistent with Boman, Mowen and Higgins (2019) who established that a dysfunctional family setting in informal settlement creates an environment that makes women vulnerable to involvement in criminal activities. Such dysfunctional family environments tend to justify crime or consider crime desirable based on specific circumstances. The findings are also in line with Osundwa (2021) who suggested that association with family members who are already involved in crime reinforces the criminal behavior which culminates in development of beliefs that are favorable to women criminality. This, therefore, implies that women who associate with family members or are raised by parents who are criminals are likely to engage in criminal activities.

Regarding marital status in relation to women criminality, participants agreed that marital status determines women criminality in informal settlements. One of the religious leaders resounded, *"Women who are not married were likely to engage in criminal acts. Women who are unmarried are not accountable to any person and tend to associate themselves with activities that are associated with criminality as a form of survival or fun."* This was a reflection of the concern some informal settlement area managers had about the self-control of the women in the informal settlements, as illustrated by the following narration from one of the area managers. *"From experience, I have observed that married women in the informal settlement have a sense of self-control and cannot engage in activities that will compromise their marriage. The cases of petty theft I have handled in this area are majorly committed by women who have no partners, and I normally encourage women to have partners so that the aspect of self-control can come out."* Marital status as a perceived social determinant of crime was emphasized by Maina, Ushie and Kabiru (2020), who asserted that women who were not married were more likely to associate with peers or friends who might lure them into criminal activities. In addition, Cunningham *et al.* (2021) found out that marriage helped to limit women criminality because marriage increases self-control and married women had the habit of thinking about how a spouse would respond to their criminal behavior. These findings are further supported by Abdel-Rahman, Khater and Abdel Fattah (2023), who stated that most Women in informal settlements were single, separated or divorced and spent more time in situations that might lead to crime. Therefore, it is less likely for married women to acquire criminal behavior than single women in informal settlement.

The respondents were asked whether peers influenced women's criminality in informal settlements. In response, a reformed female criminal asserted, *"I was influenced to commit a crime by my peers who were in criminal gangs, and my association with them reinforced my criminal behavior. I learnt deviant behavior through interaction within this intimate social group. The peer group provided me with the opportunities to learn and reinforced deviant norms and values, thereby influencing my decision to criminal involvement and shaping my perceptions, choices, and behaviors regarding the crime commission."* Murefu, Wamūyū and Ochieng (2019) established that women who commit crimes tend to have friends who are criminals, and criminal activity occurs in criminal groups such as criminal gangs in informal settlements. Additionally, Islam, Farooq, and Mahmood (2019) argued that social networks in informal settlements often exposed women to a wide range of individuals, including those involved in criminal activities whose close association led to women's criminal activities either out of coercion, necessity or the allure of economic gain.

On the relationship between low levels of education and women criminality, it was generally suggested that higher levels of education equipped women with skills which increased opportunities of securing formal employment unlike the limited access to education that restricted employment options leading to illicit activities as a means of survival especially in informal settlements. A religious leader opined, *"Low levels of education among women in informal settlements make women feel vulnerable to exploitation and coercion by criminal networks operating within the informal settlement due to pressures of social and economic challenges."* In addition, a police officer illustrated, *"Women with a low level of education in informal settlement lack awareness of their rights and how to navigate legal channels, making them more susceptible to involvement in criminal activities without fully comprehending the risks involved. The low level of education among women in informal settlements encourages associations with individuals in criminal activities, increasing exposure to behaviors and normalizing the criminal behavior within their social circles in the informal settlements."* Ndung'u, Lunjalu and Wamalwa (2021) conducted an analysis of types of personality among female offenders in Langata correctional institution and found that the level of education was a key factor in crime commission by inmates and it was necessitated by poor academic background. This implies that most female inmates at the institution had an inadequate educational background. Murefu, Wamūyū and Ochieng (2019) also affirm that the lack of access to quality education limits the economic prospects of women and reduces their employability, which leads to fewer job opportunities and lower income potential, leaving criminal activities as the only viable option for survival.

When asked whether alcohol and drug abuse influenced women's involvement in criminal activities, focus group participants revealed that socio-economic challenges were prevalent, and women often turned to alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism for trauma and stress or to escape the harsh realities of life. In this regard, a religious leader stated, *"Women are vulnerable and engage in criminal behaviors such as drug trafficking or theft to support their addiction or achieve financial needs. He further added that the social networks within these communities often facilitate drug availability, which makes criminal activities more appealing, further perpetuating the cycle of substance abuse and crime among women."* In agreement, a reformed female criminal added, *"The drug abuse was the key determinant of my involvement in the crime. To sort out women's criminality, adequate support services and interventions are needed to address substance abuse and its associated criminality among women in informal settlements."* The results supported the findings of Chepkonga (2020), who established that access to alcohol and drug abuse exacerbated vulnerabilities, contributed to social breakdown and created an environment in which criminal activities become more appealing to women within informal settlements. Mburu, Limmer, and Holland (2019) also suggested that women engaged in crimes such as theft, prostitution, or drug trafficking to sustain addictive behaviour and as the means to acquire the necessary funds to purchase drugs or alcohol.

Regarding the influence of cultural norms on women's involvement in criminal activities, an area manager pointed out that *"Cultural expectations and gender roles often shape women's behavior, limiting their opportunities for autonomy and economic independence while simultaneously defining acceptable and unacceptable actions."* A religious leader resonated, *"Traditional gender norms discourage women from engaging in overt criminal behavior, thus leading to underreporting or concealment of criminal activity. However, cultural norms also contribute to women's vulnerability to certain crimes, such as domestic violence or human trafficking, due to societal perceptions of women's roles and their limited access to resources or support networks."* A reformed female criminal added, *"Cultural stigmatization of women criminality impacts the legal treatment and social reintegration of women who do engage in criminal behavior, creating barriers to rehabilitation and reintegration into society, therefore promoting criminality in the informal settlements."* Cultural acceptance or tolerance of particular criminal activities shaped women's involvement in criminal activities (Ferrell, 2017). Moreover, Moriconi (2018) argued that cultural norms and values had a substantial impact on women's involvement in criminal activities within informal settlements.

Concerning Media exposure's influence on women's criminality, the focus group participants agreed that media exposure contributed to women's criminality through sensationalized depictions of crime and criminal behaviour in the media, which normalize deviant conduct, leading to desensitization and potential emulation of such behaviour, particularly among vulnerable women in an informal settlement. A police officer elaborated, *"Media portrayals often perpetuate harmful stereotypes and gender norms, framing women primarily as victims or objects of desire rather than as complex individuals with agency, and this creates a distorted self-image and foster feelings of powerlessness or alienation, which drive women towards criminal activities as a means of asserting control or gaining recognition."* A reformed female criminal affirmed, *"media portray criminal lifestyles that glamorize illicit behavior creating the perception of easy money or excitement associated with illegal activities. This serves as a powerful lure for women who feel marginalized or disenfranchised by mainstream society, leading them to seek validation or belonging within criminal subcultures depicted in the media."* A religious leader added, *"Exposure to media contents motivates women in informal settlements to engage in crime to attain certain lifestyles highly hyped by the media, especially if the portrayed lifestyle is as a result of criminal behaviour."* In regard to exposure to media content, Hollis, Downey, Del Carmen, and Dobbs (2017) stated that media and social networks perpetuated materialistic values and idealized lifestyles, creating feelings of frustration and inadequacy, particularly among women facing economic instability. Consequently, the heightened pressure to fit in or survive exerted a profound influence towards criminal activities as a perceived means of achieving unattainable goals. Besides, Gottfried and Shearer (2016) emphasized that exposure of women to stories of successful criminal activities or opportunities for quick financial gain through media and social networks distorted the perception of criminal opportunities by normalizing crime.

5. Recommendations

- Law enforcement officers may consider eradicating the use and misuse of alcohol and drugs in an attempt to curb women criminality in informal settlements.
- Women in informal settlements may consider living within family structure setups to mitigate the tendency to engage in criminal activities.
- The Ministry of Education policymakers may initiate programs aimed at increasing literacy levels and reinforcing value-based cultural practices among women in informal settlements.

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