

Psychosocial factors and gender characteristics of crime: the social and cultural context of Georgia

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Abstract

This study examines the psychosocial and gender-specific factors shaping criminal behaviour in Georgia, emphasising how social, cultural and economic conditions influence offending. The analysis draws on anomie theory, social learning theory and biosocial perspectives to explain how poverty, family instability, limited educational opportunities and inadequate social support increase vulnerability to criminal involvement. The findings reveal distinct gender differences in both motivations and behavioural patterns: women's offences are more often connected to traumatic experiences, coercion and exposure to violence, while men's criminal behaviour is more frequently associated with impulsivity, aggression and broader social acceptance of risk-taking. The research is based on literature review, semi-structured interviews and an analysis of national crime statistics, legal practices and rehabilitation programmes in Georgia. Overall, the study concludes that gender stereotypes significantly influence not only the pathways into crime but also legal responses and rehabilitation outcomes. The results highlight the need for gender-sensitive criminal justice policies and tailored support strategies.

Keywords

Georgia • criminal behaviour • social environment

INTRODUCTION

Crime is a complex social phenomenon shaped by factors operating at individual, cultural, economic and psychological levels. It reflects not only individual behaviour but also the broader social context in which a person lives. As in many other countries, both women and men are involved in various forms of criminal behaviour in Georgia. However, the role of gender in criminological research remains underexplored (Chesney-Lind and Pasko, 2013). Contemporary studies suggest that psychosocial factors—such as traumatic childhood experiences, lack of education, economic hardship, domestic violence or social disconnection—play a significant role in the development of criminal behaviour (Andrews and Bonta, 2010). At the same time, gender may uniquely influence how crime is perceived, experienced and enacted (Daly and Chesney-Lind, 1998). In Georgia's social and cultural context, crimes committed by women and men may involve different motivations and psychological pathways (Heidensohn and Silvestri, 2012). Although official statistics indicate that women commit fewer crimes, only few research works have investigated whether the psychosocial environments leading to offending differ between male and female offenders (Steffensmeier and Allan, 1996).

In this context, this article argues that criminal behaviour in Georgia is shaped by the interaction of psychosocial vulnerability, gender norms and structural inequality. Using anomie theory, social learning theory and biosocial perspectives, the study demonstrates that men and women engage in crime through distinct mechanisms: men primarily through impulsivity and socialised aggression; and women through trauma, coercion and emotional dependency. The argument developed in this paper is that Georgia's current criminal justice practices do not sufficiently account for these gendered pathways, limiting the effectiveness of rehabilitation and prevention efforts.

Given these gaps in existing studies, the aim of this study was to identify and compare the core psychosocial factors contributing to criminal behaviour among women and men. The research adopted a qualitative methodology, utilising expert interviews with psychologists and social workers who work directly with individuals convicted of theft. This focus was grounded in national crime trends: according to recent statistics from the National Statistics Office of Georgia (2025), theft and other property crimes account for the highest proportion of recorded offences in the country, comprising more than 35% of all registered crimes. These crimes are often linked to economic hardship, social exclusion and

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psychological distress, making them highly relevant for analysing the interplay of individual and environmental factors in criminal behaviour. Moreover, theft is among the most common offences committed by both male and female offenders globally, providing a suitable basis for examining gender-specific psychosocial mechanisms (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime/ UNODC, 2019). The findings of this study show that gendered criminal behaviour in Georgia emerges from the interaction of structural inequality, trauma and socially learned norms, producing distinct psychosocial pathways for men and women.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Crime as a psychosocial and socially constructed phenomenon

Early criminological thought emphasised that crime cannot be understood solely as a legal category but must be analysed through psychological and social dimensions. Ellwood (1911) argued that criminal behaviour reflects a person's difficulties in adapting to prevailing social norms, highlighting the need to examine motives, personality and emotional tendencies. Freund (1915) similarly emphasised the importance of codification and classification, distinguishing between specific crimes—defined by clear legal attributes—and generalised crimes, which reflect broader behavioural tendencies. These foundational perspectives stressed the importance of understanding the offender rather than focussing exclusively on the offence.

Building on this, Becker (1963) conceptualised crime as a social construct shaped by cultural norms and societal reactions. Behaviours criminalised in one society may be tolerated or even normalised in another, demonstrating that crime emerges through interactions between individual traits and the broader environment. This conceptual shift forms the basis for contemporary psychosocial approaches, which view crime as the product of interconnected biological, psychological and contextual influences.

Individual-level psychological and biological factors

Modern criminological approaches emphasise that criminal behaviour arises from the interaction of individual biological predispositions and environmental influences. According to Corrections1 (2024), traits such as impulsivity and aggression increase the likelihood of offending, particularly when compounded by adverse conditions such as domestic violence or exposure to criminal surroundings. Neurobiological vulnerabilities—including disruptions in the frontal cortex or

amygdala—can impair emotional regulation and heighten impulsive or deviant behaviour.

Psychological risk factors also play a substantial role. Children and adolescents frequently imitate behaviours observed in their surroundings, illustrating the mechanisms described in social learning theory. Exposure to violence, inconsistent parenting or antisocial peer groups shape behavioural expectations and coping patterns, increasing vulnerability to future offending. Gendered trends also emerge at the individual level: as Corrections1 (2024) notes, women's criminality is often linked to trauma, emotional dependence and survival responses, while men's offences more commonly reflect impulsivity, aggression or biologically influenced risk-taking tendencies. SAGE Publications (2018) reinforces this psychosocial view, noting that traumatic childhood experiences, emotional deprivation and social isolation often manifest in maladaptive behaviours, including crime. These factors underscore how early psychological vulnerability interacts with sociocultural expectations to shape patterns of offending.

Family background and early socialisation

The family environment serves as the primary context for early socialisation and plays a decisive role in shaping later behavioural outcomes. Wright & Wright (1994) demonstrated that ineffective parental supervision, unstable family structures and domestic violence significantly increase the risk of antisocial conduct among children. Exposure to aggressive communication, frequent parental conflict or emotional neglect can impair a child's social development, leading to maladaptive coping mechanisms.

Socioeconomic conditions within the family amplify these risks. The National Institutes of Health (2016) found that youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who enter early parenthood or unstable family arrangements are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour. Early family formation and social disorganisation create structural disadvantages that hinder normative development.

Intergenerational transmission of disadvantage is also evident. Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist et al. (2022) reported that children of parents with criminal records demonstrate lower educational attainment and reduced social mobility, reinforcing cycles of marginalisation and deviance. These findings highlight how family-level risk factors interact with broader social inequities, shaping long-term developmental pathways.

Structural and socioeconomic determinants of crime

Beyond the family, broader socioeconomic structures substantially influence criminal behaviour. Kramer (2000) demonstrated that communities characterised by economic inequality, limited access to stable schools and scarce employment opportunities often foster environments where

youth resort to crime for survival or self-assertion. Such structural deprivation erodes social connections and weakens the internalisation of normative values.

Northwest Career College (2024) similarly emphasised that poverty—particularly when accompanied by limited education and employment opportunities—creates conditions conducive to offending. The cycle of deprivation often follows a predictable trajectory: poverty → unemployment → crime → conviction → social exclusion.

Economic hardship intensifies vulnerabilities for specific populations, including individuals with mental health disorders. Bennett et al. (2005) found that inadequate access to housing, healthcare and social services increases the likelihood of criminalisation among those with serious mental illness, often pushing them towards criminal networks and deepening social marginalisation.

Structural exclusion also shapes the psychosocial experiences of youth. According to the University of Michigan (2024), perceived injustice, blocked opportunities and limited social support contribute to frustration, which can escalate into violent or deviant behaviour. Conversely, education serves as a strong protective factor. Northwest Career College (2024) highlights that low educational attainment restricts social mobility and increases the risk of offending, while Kramer (2000) found that continued education—whether vocational or academic—significantly reduces criminal behaviour during the transition to adulthood.

These studies collectively underscore that criminal behaviour is not merely a personal failure but a response to structural inequities and constrained opportunities.

Cultural norms, social expectations and crime

Culture functions as both a contextual influence and a powerful regulator of behaviour. Felson and Clarke (1998) demonstrated that situational opportunities—such as weak supervision or environmental vulnerability—create openings for criminal acts, encapsulated in the phrase: ‘opportunity makes the thief’. Yet, opportunity does not operate in isolation; cultural norms shape how individuals perceive, justify or reject crime.

According to the Australian Psychological Society (2024), cultures with strong honour-based value systems may legitimise aggression in the defence of reputation, thereby increasing the tolerance of violent behaviour. These findings highlight how cultural beliefs influence perceptions of acceptable conduct, shaping both the frequency and the nature of offending.

Durkheim’s concept of anomie (as cited in Marks, 1974) provides an additional cultural lens, suggesting that crime arises when societal norms lose regulatory power. When the gap widens between cultural goals and the means

available to achieve them, social cohesion deteriorates, and individuals may adopt deviant strategies. Thus, culture not only influences attitudes towards crime but also mediates the impact of structural inequalities.

Gender, crime and social judgements

Gendered expectations profoundly shape perceptions of criminal behaviour. Studies from SAGE Journals ((De Nadai et al., 2020; Phillips and de Roos, 2022) demonstrate that identical criminal acts are judged differently depending on the offender’s gender: women are more often perceived as victims or coerced actors, while men are associated with aggression and intentional violence. These biased perceptions influence both social reactions and legal responses.

Shapiro (2016) argues that when women commit crimes—particularly violent or non-normative acts—their behaviour is judged as a dual violation: of legal norms and of gender expectations. This aligns with broader research suggesting that legal systems are rarely gender-neutral ones.

ResearchGate (2024) findings indicate that gender differences in crime also reflect disparities in emotional regulation and conflict resolution. Men raised under rigid gender-role socialisation may lack non-violent coping strategies, increasing the likelihood of aggressive behaviour. These internalised expectations shape both behaviour and self-concept.

Gender-specific patterns of offending and public perception

Gender differences manifest not only in public perceptions but also in the nature of offences committed. According to Walker et al. (1996), men are disproportionately represented in violent, serious and serial offences, whereas women are more commonly implicated in property- or family-related crimes. These patterns reflect both opportunity structures and psychosocial influences.

Hagenbuch (2023) showed that women’s offending is often interpreted as a violation of normative femininity, reinforcing Heidensohn’s (1968) Double Deviance Theory: female offenders face stigma for both breaking the law and rejecting gender expectations. Google Books (2024) further reported that female offenders—especially mothers—are judged more harshly when their crimes contradict societal roles associated with care and morality.

Gender inequality at the societal level also affects crime patterns. Lei et al. (2014) found that societies with stronger gender equality experience lower levels of violence overall, suggesting that gender norms shape collective behaviour beyond individual offending.

UNODC (2024) adds that many women involved in criminal justice systems—particularly in developing countries—are drawn into crime through violence, coercion or exploitation.

The Council on Criminal Justice (2024) similarly highlights that women's experiences in justice systems are often misunderstood or overlooked, leading to responses that fail to account for gendered pathways.

Theoretical explanations for criminal behaviour

Anomie theory: Durkheim (1897) and Merton (1938) conceptualised crime as emerging from social deregulation and blocked opportunities. Durkheim described anomie as a breakdown of normative guidance, while Merton identified distinct modes of adaptation—including 'innovation', where individuals pursue societal goals through illegitimate means when legitimate avenues are inaccessible. Passas (1990) extended these ideas to corporate contexts, demonstrating that structural pressures can induce deviance at both individual and organisational levels.

Social learning theory: Bandura (1977) argued that behaviour is learned through observation, imitation and reinforcement. Burgess and Akers (1966) and, later, Akers (1985) emphasised differential association, definitions, reinforcement and imitation as key mechanisms through which criminal behaviour develops. These frameworks illustrate how repeated exposure to criminal models—common in marginalised environments—normalises deviant behaviour. This is particularly relevant in contexts, including Georgia, where offenders often come from communities where criminality is normalised.

Biosocial criminology: Biosocial perspectives integrate biological predispositions with environmental influences. Raine (2002) found that neurophysiological deficits can predispose individuals to antisocial behaviour, but such vulnerabilities manifest primarily within adverse social conditions. Beaver and others (Beaver et al., 2015) similarly argue for an interdisciplinary approach that acknowledges both biological and social determinants. Neuroimaging evidence from Bufo and Luttrell (2005) further demonstrates that impaired emotional regulation—mediated by neurological dysfunction—interacts with trauma and parenting to shape aggression. Collectively, these theories offer a multidimensional understanding of crime that aligns with gender-specific pathways.

Cultural and Georgian social contexts

Contemporary data indicate shifts in gendered crime patterns within Georgia. According to National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat, 2024), women constitute a growing proportion of property crime offenders, and domestic violence cases increasingly reveal women as both victims and offenders. While Georgia's homicide rate remains below regional averages (World Bank, 2023), UNODC (2022) reports that gender-motivated femicide continues to pose a serious concern.

Several initiatives have been developed to address these issues. Recent reforms and programmes addressing gender and crime in Georgia have been supported by international

organisations, including the Council of Europe, Penal Reform International, and UN Women (Council of Europe, 2024; Penal Reform International, n.d.; UN Women, 2014, 2016). Programmes by Penal Reform International target women's mental health, education and reintegration needs. The National Probation Agency's violence management programmes focus on preventing recidivism by addressing harmful gender norms. Despite these steps, gaps persist. The Council of Europe (2024) notes that gender-sensitive judicial reforms remain incomplete, and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2024) Joint Programme for Gender Equality highlights the ongoing challenge of entrenched stereotypes and limited institutional capacity.

These contextual dynamics illustrate that while Georgia has taken steps towards gender-responsive criminal justice, systemic constraints and social norms continue to shape offending patterns and institutional reactions. Integrating theoretical perspectives with local realities reveals how structural inequality, cultural expectations and psychosocial vulnerabilities jointly contribute to gendered crime pathways.

Across the reviewed literature, crime emerges as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interplay of individual predispositions, social learning, structural inequality, cultural norms and gendered expectations. Biological and psychological vulnerabilities interact with family instability, poverty and limited educational opportunities to create environments conducive to crime. Gender-based patterns—such as trauma-driven offending among women or aggression-linked behaviour among men—further underscore the need for differentiated approaches.

In the Georgian context, rising female involvement in property crime, persistent gender stereotypes and insufficient rehabilitation support demonstrate the relevance of integrating global criminological theories with localised insights. The anomie theory explains blocked opportunities; the social learning theory clarifies how crime is transmitted across marginal environments; and biosocial perspectives illuminate individual differences. Together, these frameworks emphasise that effective prevention must address both structural barriers and gender-specific vulnerabilities.

METHODOLOGY

This study used an expert-based qualitative research design aimed at identifying psychosocial factors that influence criminal behaviour differently in men and women. This approach was selected because the goal was not statistical generalisation but the acquisition of rich, context-specific insights based on experts' professional experiences.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research and ethical constraints, initial efforts were made to obtain access to participants through

the penitentiary system. However, official approval was not granted. Since professionals currently employed in the public sector are required to obtain formal authorisation to participate in research—without which participation would violate ethical standards—we chose to interview specialists who were no longer employed in public service at the time of the study but possessed relevant professional experience. According to Patton (2002), the participation of such respondents does not violate confidentiality or ethical standards, as they discuss past experiences and are not identified as representatives of their former institutions.

Consequently, participant selection followed a purposeful sampling strategy, which is widely accepted in qualitative research. The selection criteria included the following: (1) professional competence; (2) direct practical experience working with male and female offenders convicted of theft; and (3) willingness to participate. Ultimately, five experts were selected—psychologists and social workers with years of experience in the penitentiary system and in alternative justice institutions (e.g., probation bureaus, psychosocial service centres).

Despite the small sample size, the study relied on the principle of information power, which emphasises the relevance and richness of the data over the number of participants. As Malterud et al. (2015) explain, when the research focus is narrow, participants have homogeneous expertise and the data are rich in content, a small sample can be sufficient to achieve analytical depth.

Following participant recruitment, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, developed based on scientific literature, professional standards and ethical principles. Each interview was conducted individually in a confidential setting, with informed consent obtained from each participant. Interviews lasted between 30 min and 50 min, depending on the respondent's engagement and emotional readiness.

After completing the interviews, the data were analysed using qualitative content analysis, which enabled the identification of gender-specific thematic units and a systematic examination of similarities and differences. The results revealed mechanisms underlying gendered expressions of criminogenic behaviour.

RESULTS

Qualitative analysis of the content of expert interviews revealed several distinct gendered patterns in the psychosocial foundations of criminal behaviour. The following findings present only the empirical results, without theoretical interpretation.

1. Emotional and behavioural patterns—Experts consistently reported that male offenders exhibited high levels of impulsivity, uncontrolled aggression and

a tendency to externalise blame. One psychologist noted as follows:

Some men are even proud of what they did. They shift responsibility—sometimes to the state, sometimes to their families.

In contrast, female offenders frequently displayed emotional distress, anxiety and a strong sense of guilt. Their narratives commonly referenced childhood abandonment, domestic violence or long-term psychological pressure. One social worker stated as follows:

They often expressed that their lives might have taken a different path if someone had helped them in time.

2. Social and environmental influences—All experts highlighted that offenders of both genders often come from environments characterised by poverty, limited education, unstable housing and weak support systems. One psychologist explained as follows:

Many grow up in environments where crime is a lifestyle, not a choice.

Experts noted that women were particularly affected by intimate partner violence, emotional dependence and caregiving burdens, which shaped their pathways into criminal activity.

3. Motivational differences—Interviewees indicated that men's criminal motivations frequently involved power, economic gain or retaliation. One expert described male reasoning as

revenge against the system.

By contrast, women's motivations were more often linked to emotional desperation, psychological pressure or attempts to meet basic needs.

4. Gender stereotypes in institutional responses—Experts reported that justice system responses were often shaped by gender expectations. According to participants, some women faced harsher treatment when their actions contradicted traditional gender norms, while others received more lenient treatment, particularly when perceived as primary caregivers. One psychologist summarised this duality as follows:

Sometimes women get it worse just because they're not acting like women are expected to. Other times, they're let off because they're mothers.

5. Lack of gender-specific rehabilitation services—All experts emphasised that rehabilitation programmes in Georgia are largely gender-neutral and therefore ineffective in addressing the specific needs of women. A social worker commented as follows: *There is no approach specifically tailored to women. Everyone gets the same thing—and it doesn't work.*

Experts agreed that trauma-informed interventions, community outreach and early psychosocial support were urgently needed.

DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that male and female offenders in Georgia follow distinct psychosocial pathways into crime, shaped by trauma, gender norms, structural inequality and learned behaviours. This section interprets these findings through the theoretical frameworks presented earlier.

1. Gendered emotional and behavioural mechanisms—Men's impulsivity and externalisation of blame align with biosocial criminology, which links aggression to neurobiological predispositions combined with adverse environments. Women's internalised distress and guilt reflect psychosocial vulnerability pathways, suggesting that traumatic experiences, dependency and fear shape their criminal involvement. These differences support criminological research indicating that men tend to externalise distress, whereas women internalise it, resulting in different behavioural outcomes.
2. Structural and environmental pressures—Experts' observations confirm that poverty, limited education and weak support systems function as criminogenic environments for both genders. This corresponds with the anomie theory, which explains how individuals turn to illegal means when legitimate pathways to stability and success are blocked. For women, these structural pressures intersect with emotional and relational vulnerabilities, indicating that gender and social inequality jointly produce distinct pathways into crime.
3. Motivational differences and theoretical alignment—Men's motivation for power, control or economic gain reflects Merton's 'innovation' mode, where individuals respond to blocked opportunities by adopting illegitimate strategies. Women's motivations—rooted in relational instability, coercion or emotional distress—align more closely with gender-sensitive criminological theories that highlight trauma, dependency and social pressure as central drivers of female offending.
4. Gender stereotypes in the justice system—The mixed institutional responses described by experts

illustrate the persistence of double deviance: women are punished not only for breaking the law but also for violating expectations of femininity. At the same time, maternal stereotypes can lead to overly lenient responses, demonstrating inconsistent and gender-biased decision-making. This reinforces findings from international research on gendered justice outcomes.

5. Implications for rehabilitation and policy—The absence of gender-specific rehabilitation programmes suggests a gap between offenders' needs and institutional practice. Considering the strong presence of trauma among female offenders and aggression among male offenders, uniform programmes cannot address these differences. The results indicate a need for the following:

- trauma-informed services for women
- anger-management and impulse-regulation interventions for men
- community-based prevention
- broader structural reforms addressing poverty, education and inequality.

Overall, the discussion highlights that gender-neutral criminal justice policies overlook critical psychosocial mechanisms and therefore limit the effectiveness of prevention and rehabilitation.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While this study provides valuable insights into the gendered pathways of criminal behaviour within Georgia's sociocultural context, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was small and limited to five experts, which, although appropriate for qualitative research, may not fully represent the breadth of perspectives within the justice system. Second, due to institutional barriers, data collection was restricted to professionals no longer working in the public sector, potentially excluding current institutional dynamics. Third, the study focussed solely on theft-related offences and may not be generalisable to other crime types such as violent crime or cybercrime. Lastly, while expert perspectives offer rich thematic insights, the study did not include direct input from offenders, which could have added an additional layer of depth to the psychosocial analysis.

CONCLUSION

This study, based on expert interviews with psychologists and social workers, applied a thematic analysis to identify and

compare the psychosocial factors shaping male and female criminal behaviour in Georgia's socio-cultural context.

The findings indicate that men are often driven by the pursuit of power or status, especially in the face of economic strain, validating the relevance of anomie and social learning theories. Women, conversely, are more likely to commit crimes in response to trauma or relational dependency, often displaying high levels of guilt and distress. These patterns reflect gender-specific pathways to criminal behaviour shaped by social learning and biosocial influences.

Based on these findings, the results highlight the importance of developing gender-sensitive preventive and rehabilitative strategies. Effective responses must address not only individual psychological traits but also the broader cultural and structural environments in which these behaviours occur. However, in Georgia, where institutional responses to crime remain largely undifferentiated by gender, addressing these gaps is essential. Doing so will require targeted policy reforms and interventions that consider the distinct mechanisms through which gender, trauma and social inequality interact in the formation of criminal behaviour.

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