International Journal of
LAW, ARTS AND HUMANITIES
Peer Reviewed, Referred & Indexed Journal
www.zesterapublications.com
ISSN: 3070-0523
Original Research Paper

Women and Criminal Law: Victimization, Offending, and the Pursuit of Gender-Responsive Justice

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Abstract

Women occupy a distinctive and often contradictory position within criminal law: they are markedly under-represented as offenders yet disproportionately represented as victims of intimate and sexual violence, and the legal system has historically struggled to respond coherently to either role. This paper synthesizes research from feminist criminology, sentencing studies, and comparative legal reform to examine three interlocking questions: how criminal law has historically constructed female criminality, how courts treat women differently from men at the point of arrest, bail, and sentencing, and how legislative reform *(e.g., the U.S. Violence Against Women Act, the criminalization of coercive control in the United Kingdom, and India's post-2012 overhaul of its sexual-offence and domestic-violence law)* has attempted to close long-standing protection gaps. Drawing on global imprisonment data and empirical sentencing research, the paper shows that the female share of the world prison population, while still small at 6.8%, is growing faster than the male share, and that gender continues to shape case outcomes through competing *chivalry* and *evil woman* dynamics that cut differently across offense types. The paper concludes that a gender-responsive criminal law agenda must simultaneously reduce the unnecessary criminalization and incarceration of women whose offending is rooted in victimization and poverty, while strengthening protective law for women who remain under-served as victims of gender-based violence.

Keywords: *feminist criminology; gender and sentencing; female incarceration; violence against women; coercive control; chivalry hypothesis*

1. Introduction

Criminal law has never been gender-neutral in practice, even where it is gender-neutral on its face. From the earliest criminological writing onward, the *criminal woman* was treated as an aberration to be explained through biology, psychology, or moral failing rather than as a subject of the same social and structural forces used to explain male offending (Pollak, 1950). Feminist scholars have spent the past five decades correcting this omission, documenting both the distinctive pathways that lead women into contact with the criminal justice system and the ways that system routinely fails women as victims of violence committed overwhelmingly by men (Adler, 1975; Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988).

This paper reviews that body of scholarship along three axes that recur throughout the literature on women and criminal law: women as *offenders*, whose pathways into crime are shaped by poverty, trauma, and prior victimization; women as *victims*, whose experiences of intimate partner and sexual violence have driven successive waves of statutory reform; and women as *subjects of differential treatment* by police, prosecutors, and courts, where competing chivalry and "evil woman" dynamics produce inconsistent outcomes depending on offense type (Franklin & Fearn, 2008; Rodriguez et al., 2006). Alongside the predominantly U.S. and U.K. sentencing and reform literature, the paper devotes a dedicated section to India, whose post-2012 sexual-offence reforms, dual civil-criminal domestic violence framework, and ongoing judicial debate over the misuse of its principal cruelty statute offer an instructive point of

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comparison with Western jurisdictions. The paper closes by considering what a coherent, gender-responsive criminal law agenda would need to address across all of these axes simultaneously.

2. Theoretical Framework: Feminist Criminology

Feminist criminology emerged in the 1970s as a direct challenge to a discipline that had, in Daly and Chesney-Lind's (1988) phrase, treated crime as an overwhelmingly male phenomenon and simply "added women and stirred" wherever gender could not be ignored. Its central claim is not merely that women are involved in different crimes than men, but that the categories of crime, deviance, and criminal responsibility are themselves partly constructed through a male-centered lens (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988). Belknap's (2021) widely used framework organizes the field's concerns into four connected areas — women as victims, women as offenders, women working inside the legal system, and the legal and policy response — shown schematically in Figure 4.

Figure 4
Conceptual Framework: Feminist Criminology's Four Points of Focus

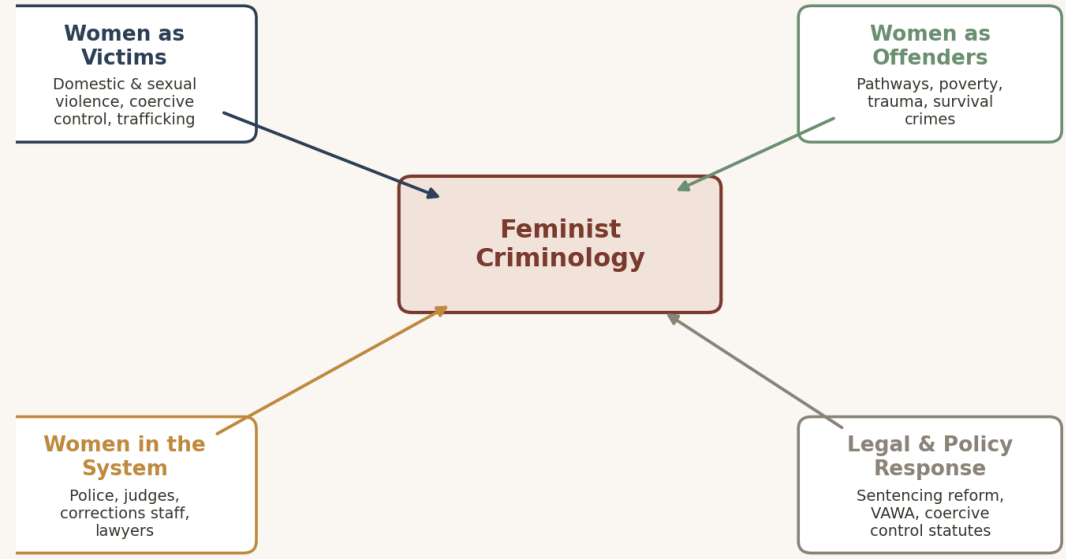

Figure 4. A conceptual map of feminist criminology's four interlocking points of focus, adapted from Belknap (2021).

Two features of this framework are worth emphasizing for a discussion of criminal law specifically. First, the boxes are not independent: a woman's status as an offender is frequently continuous with, or a direct consequence of, her prior victimization — a relationship criminologists term the *victimization-to-offending pathway* (Belknap, 2021). Second, the legal and policy response operates on a considerable lag relative to the other three domains; statutory reform of the kind discussed in Section 6 has tended to follow, rather than anticipate, empirical documentation of women's distinctive experiences of both victimization and offending.

3. Women as Victims: The Protection Gap in Criminal Law

The clearest area of gender asymmetry in criminal victimization is intimate partner and sexual violence, where women are victimized by male partners at substantially higher rates than the reverse. For much of the twentieth century, criminal law in most common-law jurisdictions treated such violence as a private,

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domestic matter largely outside the reach of the police and the courts. Legislative reform since the 1990s has sought to close that gap, though scholars continue to debate how completely it has succeeded.

3.1 The U.S. Violence Against Women Act

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), signed into law in 1994, was the first comprehensive U.S. federal statute to treat domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking as offenses warranting a dedicated criminal-justice and civil-remedy infrastructure rather than purely a matter for state family courts (U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women, 2022). VAWA created federal criminal provisions, funded specialized police and prosecutorial units, and established civil remedies for survivors, and it has been reauthorized four times — in 2000, 2005, 2013, and 2022 — with each reauthorization expanding its definitions and its funded services (U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women, 2022).

3.2 Criminalizing Coercive Control

A more recent wave of reform has targeted a gap that VAWA-style incident-based statutes do not fully close: patterns of psychological, financial, and behavioral control that fall short of discrete physical assaults but can be equally dangerous to victims. England and Wales criminalized "controlling or coercive behaviour" in an intimate or family relationship under section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015, and Scotland's Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act followed with a similarly pattern-based offense (Aldridge, 2020). Aldridge (2020) cautions, however, that UK policy discourse around the reform has sometimes minimized the specifically gendered nature of domestic abuse by adopting gender-neutral framing even where the underlying harm is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against women. A parallel debate is underway in several U.S. states, where advocates disagree about whether criminalizing coercive control protects victims or risks being misused against the very people it is meant to protect, given the difficulty of defining the offense with precision (The Marshall Project, 2025).

4. Women as Offenders: Pathways and the Global Rise in Female Incarceration

Where women do come into contact with the criminal justice system as defendants, the offense profile differs markedly from men's: women are disproportionately convicted of property, drug, and low-level economic offenses rather than violent crime, and a large share of female offending histories include prior victimization, substance dependence, or untreated mental illness (Belknap, 2021). This pattern, often called the *pathways perspective*, reframes much female offending as downstream of poverty and abuse rather than as evidence of independent criminal motivation.

Despite women's continued minority share of the world's prisoners, the trend line is striking. According to the sixth edition of the World Female Imprisonment List, more than 733,000 women and girls are currently incarcerated worldwide, and the global female prison population has grown by roughly 53% since 2000, compared with approximately 20% growth in the male prison population over the same period (Fair & Walmsley, 2025). Women and girls still make up only 6.8% of the global prison population (Fair & Walmsley, 2025), but the pace of growth — illustrated in Figures 1 and 3 — has prompted renewed scrutiny of whether incarceration is a proportionate response to the offenses, often non-violent, for which women are most commonly imprisoned.

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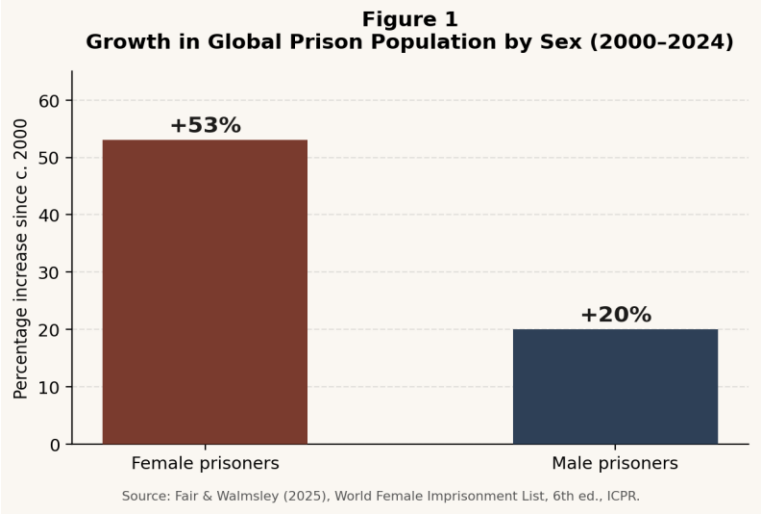

Figure 1. Growth in the global prison population by sex since approximately 2000. Source: Fair & Walmsley (2025).

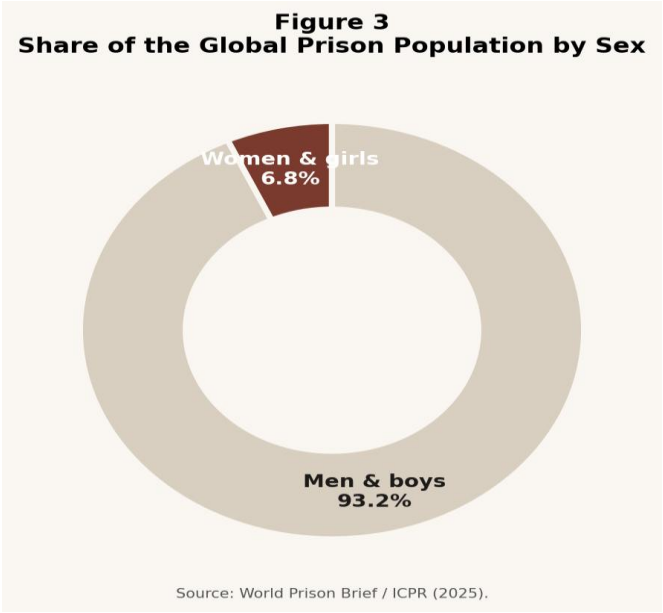

Figure 3. Share of the global prison population held by women versus men. Source: World Prison Brief / ICPR (2025).

The distribution of female imprisonment is also highly uneven across countries. The United States alone holds close to a quarter of the world's incarcerated women, followed at considerable distance by China, Brazil, Russia, and Thailand (Fair & Walmsley, 2025), as shown in Figure 2. Researchers attribute the U.S. figure in large part to the country's broader reliance on incarceration as a response to drug offenses and to the sharply higher rate at which American women are held in pretrial detention relative to women in other high-income countries.

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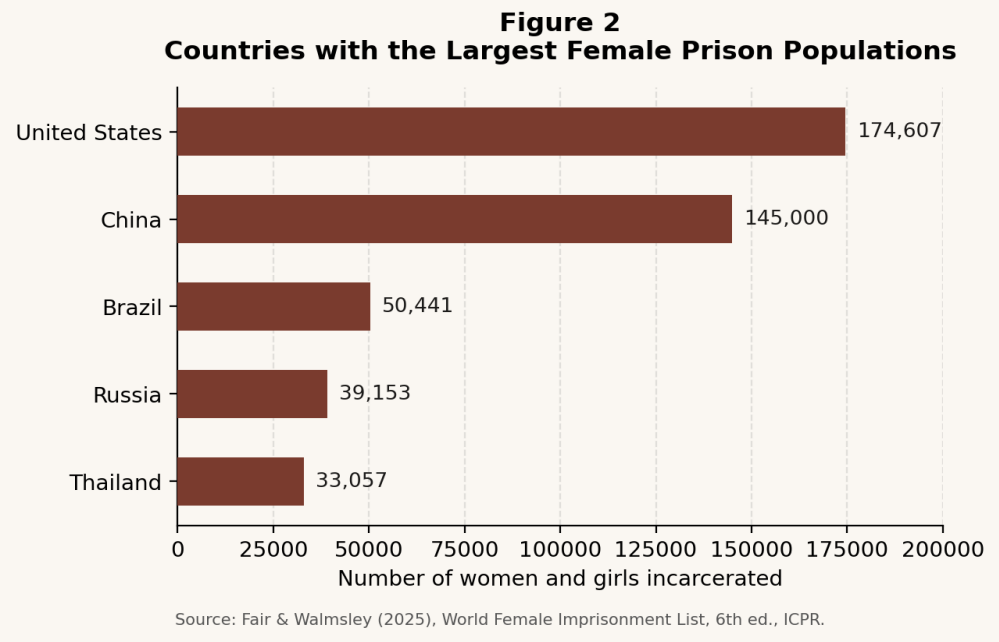

Figure 2. Countries with the largest female prison populations by absolute number. Source: Fair & Walmsley (2025).

5. Gender and Sentencing: The Chivalry–Evil Woman Debate

A distinct empirical literature asks not how women's offending differs from men's, but how the criminal justice system treats women differently once they are charged with a comparable offense. Two competing theoretical accounts dominate this literature. The *chivalry*, or paternalism, hypothesis — traceable to Pollak's (1950) foundational work — holds that a male-dominated system extends greater leniency to women at bail, plea, and sentencing because judges and prosecutors perceive them as less blameworthy or less dangerous. The competing *evil woman*, or double-deviance, hypothesis holds the opposite: because a female offender has broken both the criminal law and prevailing gender-role expectations, she may in fact be judged more harshly than a similarly situated man, particularly for violent or otherwise "unfeminine" offenses.

Empirical findings tend to support a more nuanced middle position sometimes called *selective chivalry*: leniency toward female defendants is strongest for property and drug offenses but weakens or disappears for violent crime (Rodriguez et al., 2006). Using felony case data tracked from a defendant's initial appearance through sentencing, Goulette et al. (2015) found that women received more favorable outcomes than men at multiple decision points — including pretrial release and final sentence — even after controlling for offense severity and criminal history, evidence that gender differentiation compounds across, rather than being confined to, a single stage of the process. Franklin and Fearn (2008) similarly found support for a chivalry/paternalism effect on sentence length among murder defendants, though the effect interacted with the race of both the offender and the victim, underscoring that gender disparities rarely operate independently of race and class.

5.1 Comparing the Two Hypotheses

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Dimension	Chivalry / Paternalism Hypothesis	Evil Woman / Double-Deviance Hypothesis
Core claim	Women receive more lenient treatment because they are seen as less blameworthy or dangerous.	Women who offend are judged more harshly because they violate both the law and gender norms.
Strongest for	Property crime, drug offenses, first-time offenders.	Violent crime, offenses against children, offenses seen as "unfeminine."
Key mechanism	Judicial and prosecutorial paternalism toward women.	Social control of gender-role deviance.
Representative research	Pollak (1950); Goulette et al. (2015).	Rodriguez et al. (2006); Franklin & Fearn (2008).
Empirical support	Consistent for non-violent offenses.	Effect weakens/reverses as offense severity rises.

6. Comparative Legal Reform: The United States and the United Kingdom

Legal reform touching women and criminal law has generally proceeded along two separate tracks: strengthening protection and prosecution for gender-based violence, and — more recently, and more unevenly — reconsidering the appropriateness of incarceration for non-violent female offenders whose crimes are frequently linked to poverty or prior abuse. Table 2 summarizes several of the reforms discussed in this paper alongside the international framework, the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), that underpins many of them.

Instrument	Jurisdiction / Year	Core Provision
Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)	United States, 1994 (reauthorized 2000, 2005, 2013, 2022)	Created federal criminal provisions and funding for domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking response (U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women, 2022).
Serious Crime Act 2015, s.76	England & Wales, 2015	Criminalized controlling or coercive behaviour within an intimate or family relationship (Aldridge, 2020).
Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act	Scotland, 2018	Introduced a statutory offense capturing a pattern of abusive behaviour, including psychological abuse, rather than requiring discrete incidents.
CEDAW	United Nations, 1979 (international)	Obliges signatory states to eliminate discrimination against women in law and practice, including in the administration of criminal justice (United Nations, 1979).

Taken together, these reforms show a criminal law system still assembling its response piecemeal: statutes addressing coercive control in the United Kingdom did not exist until two decades after VAWA's first

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passage in the United States, and neither jurisdiction has yet paired its victim-protection statutes with a comparably systematic reconsideration of how non-violent female offenders are sentenced or incarcerated.

7. The Indian Experience: Reform, Protection, and Its Limits

India offers a particularly instructive case study because its criminal law relating to women has been substantially rewritten twice within little more than a decade — first through the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, and again through the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, which replaced the colonial-era Indian Penal Code (IPC) with effect from 1 July 2024 (Press Information Bureau, 2025). Both reform moments illustrate the same pattern identified in the U.S. and U.K. material above: statutory change driven by public mobilization around visible cases of violence against women, followed by a slower, more contested effort to work out the law's practical operation.

7.1 Sexual Offence Reform After 2012

The gang rape and murder of a young woman on a moving bus in Delhi in December 2012 — widely referred to in Indian media and legal writing as the "Nirbhaya" case — triggered nationwide protests and the constitution of a three-member committee headed by former Chief Justice J. S. Verma to recommend reform of the country's sexual-offence law within thirty days (Lloyd Law College, 2022; iPleaders, 2022). Most of the Committee's recommendations were carried into the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, which broadened the statutory definition of rape beyond penetrative intercourse, created new offenses of acid attack, voyeurism, stalking, and disrobing, introduced enhanced sentencing including the death penalty for rape resulting in death or a persistent vegetative state, and made gang rape a distinct offense under a new Section 376D (Cornell Law School, n.d.; Lloyd Law College, 2022). The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 preserved and, in places, extended this framework: it consolidates offenses against women and children into a dedicated chapter, mandates audio-video recording of victim statements, and prescribes life imprisonment for the rape of a minor under eighteen (Press Information Bureau, 2025).

7.2 Domestic Violence: Civil Protection and Criminal Cruelty

India addresses domestic violence through two parallel tracks rather than a single statute. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA), in force since October 2006, is a civil remedy: it allows any woman in a domestic relationship to seek protection orders, residence rights in the shared household, and monetary relief from a magistrate, and it defines abuse broadly to include physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and economic harm (Press Information Bureau, 2025; Vakilsearch, 2026). Running alongside it is a criminal remedy, formerly Section 498A of the IPC and now Section 85 of the BNS, which punishes "cruelty" by a husband or his relatives, most often invoked in dowry-related harassment, and which is both cognizable and non-bailable (Vakilsearch, 2026). A woman may pursue both remedies simultaneously, reflecting the same civil-plus-criminal architecture found in the UK's coercive control framework.

7.3 A Parallel Misuse Debate

India's experience with Section 498A closely mirrors the coercive-control misuse debate described in Section 3.2. In *Arnesh Kumar v. State of Bihar* (2014) 8 SCC 273, the Supreme Court of India held that Section 498A had become, in its words, "a weapon rather than a shield," citing mechanical arrests of husbands and in-laws without preliminary investigation, and it directed police to apply a statutory checklist before making an arrest. The Court in *Rajesh Sharma v. State of Uttar Pradesh* (2018) 10 SCC 472 went further, ordering the creation of Family Welfare Committees to screen complaints before arrest — a mechanism the Court itself later curtailed in *Social Action Forum for Manav Adhikar v. Union of India*

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(2018) after finding that the committees had strayed into the legislative domain (S.S. Rana & Co., 2024; LegalFly, 2026). NCRB data cited in this line of cases shows Section 498A arrests falling from roughly 187,000 in 2015 to about 145,000 in 2022 even as the number of registered cases rose over the same period, consistent with the safeguards reducing arrest rates without reducing case filings (GKToday, 2025). As in the UK coercive-control debate, Indian courts have thus tried to hold two goals in tension: preserving a strong criminal remedy for genuine cruelty while guarding against its use to settle unrelated family disputes.

7.4 Women in Indian Prisons

India's female prison population is small in absolute terms but reveals the same structural pattern documented globally in Section 4. According to the National Crime Records Bureau's Prison Statistics India 2022, women accounted for 23,772 of the country's 573,220 prisoners — about 4% of the total — yet 76.33% of those women (18,146 individuals) were undertrials awaiting the conclusion of their case rather than convicted prisoners (National Crime Records Bureau, 2022). As Figure 6 shows, this undertrial share for women is essentially identical to the 75.8% undertrial share among prisoners overall, suggesting that, unlike the pretrial leniency found in some Western sentencing studies (Section 5), gender confers little advantage at the pretrial stage in the Indian system. The same report recorded 1,312 undertrial and 198 convicted women who were incarcerated together with a total of 1,709 children under the age of six, an outcome the PWDVA and BNS frameworks discussed above do not directly address (National Crime Records Bureau, 2022).

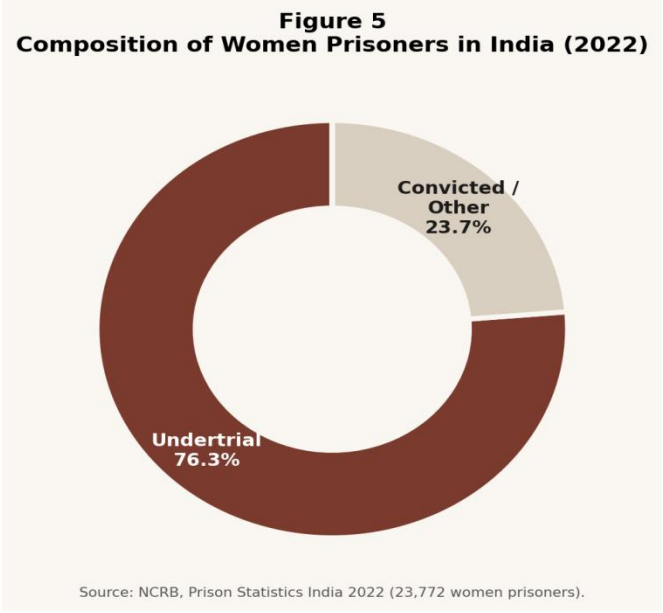

Figure 5. Composition of India's women prisoners by custodial status. Source: NCRB, Prison Statistics India 2022.

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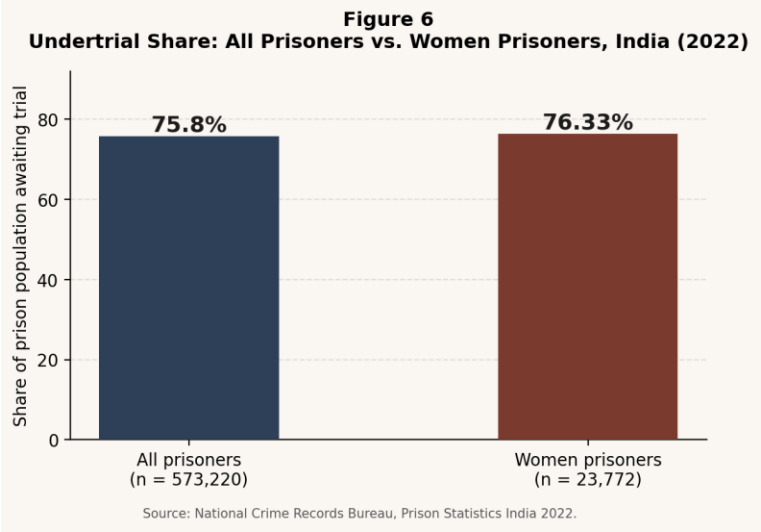

Figure 6. Share of prisoners awaiting trial, all prisoners versus women prisoners, India. Source: NCRB, Prison Statistics India 2022.

7.5 India in Comparative Perspective

Instrument	Year	Core Provision
Criminal Law (Amendment) Act	2013	Broadened the definition of rape; created new offenses (acid attack, stalking, voyeurism, disrobing); enhanced sentencing for aggravated sexual offenses (Lloyd Law College, 2022).
Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA)	2005 (in force 2006)	Civil remedy: protection orders, residence rights, and monetary relief for women in a domestic relationship (Press Information Bureau, 2025).
Section 498A IPC / Section 85 BNS	1983 / 2023	Criminalizes cruelty by a husband or his relatives; cognizable and non-bailable, subject to Supreme Court arrest safeguards (Vakilsearch, 2026; S.S. Rana & Co., 2024).
Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS)	2023 (effective 2024)	Replaced the IPC; consolidated offenses against women and children; mandates victim-statement recording and life imprisonment for rape of a minor (Press Information Bureau, 2025).

Read together with Table 2, the Indian material both confirms and complicates the comparative picture. Like VAWA and the UK's coercive-control offense, India's post-2012 reforms show a criminal law system responding, sometimes rapidly, to public demand for stronger protection against gender-based violence. But India's pretrial data (Figure 6) suggest that the chivalry effects documented in Section 5 are not universal: where the American and European sentencing literature finds women advantaged relative to men at bail and sentencing, Indian women held pretrial appear to face custodial patterns very similar to the general prison population, a divergence that future comparative research on gender and pretrial detention would do well to examine directly.

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8. Discussion: Toward a Gender-Responsive Criminal Law

Three implications follow from the evidence reviewed above. First, because a substantial share of female offending is entangled with prior victimization, criminal law reforms aimed only at offenders or only at victims will each address half of a single, connected problem; jurisdictions that have piloted trauma-informed diversion programs for women report that treating the two as linked, rather than separate, policy domains produces more durable reductions in both reoffending and repeat victimization (Belknap, 2021).

Second, sentencing research complicates any simple narrative that women are uniformly advantaged or disadvantaged by the criminal justice system: the same body of research that finds leniency for women charged with property and drug offenses finds that leniency erodes, and can reverse, for violent offenses and for women whose cases intersect with race and class disadvantage (Franklin & Fearn, 2008; Rodriguez et al., 2006). Sentencing reform aimed at reducing unwarranted disparity should therefore be calibrated to offense type and should explicitly test for interaction effects with race, rather than treating gender as a uniform adjustment.

Third, victim-protection statutes such as coercive control laws illustrate a recurring tension in this field: legal tools designed to protect women from a specific, previously invisible harm can be defined broadly enough that they are occasionally used against the victims they were designed to protect (The Marshall Project, 2025). India's decade-long line of Supreme Court decisions narrowing the arrest procedure under Section 498A shows the same tension playing out under a different statute and in a different legal tradition, and suggests that the balance between protective reach and safeguards against misuse is a recurring design problem for gender-based criminal offenses generally, not an artifact of any one jurisdiction's drafting (Arnesh Kumar v. State of Bihar, 2014; Rajesh Sharma v. State of Uttar Pradesh, 2018). Effective reform therefore requires not only new offenses but careful implementation guidance, training, and evaluation to ensure the law's practical effects track its protective intent.

Finally, the Indian pretrial data in Section 7.4 caution against generalizing the chivalry findings of Section 5 beyond the Western jurisdictions where most of that research has been conducted. A gender-responsive criminal law agenda should therefore treat empirical claims about how the system treats women as claims to be tested locally, not assumptions to be imported wholesale from one legal system to another.

9. Conclusion

Criminal law's treatment of women cannot be reduced to a single storyline of either protection or punishment; both operate simultaneously, and often on the same individuals across the course of a single life. The evidence reviewed here — from Pollak's (1950) foundational chivalry hypothesis to the twenty-first-century criminalization of coercive control — shows a field still working out how to reconcile two obligations that pull in different directions: reducing the unnecessary criminalization and incarceration of women whose offending is rooted in victimization and poverty, and strengthening protection for women who remain under-served as victims of gender-based violence. Feminist criminology's four-part framework of victims, offenders, system workers, and legal response offers a useful map for pursuing both goals together rather than in isolation.

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