

# Victim Turning Victimizer: Criminal Tendencies in Female Survivors of Domestic Violence

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## Abstract

The study aimed at identifying the criminal tendencies in the domestic violence survivors and assessing the possibilities of crime being committed by the survivors in the future. The ideology around which the study revolved is the social suppression of females in Indian society leading to female criminality. It is a phenomenological study design and the data was collected using semi-structured interview. The sample included fifteen females who had been the victims of domestic violence at some point of their life after marriage (N=15). The analysis and the interpretation of the obtained data was done using thematic analysis. It was found in this qualitative research that the females were inclined towards inflicting pain to their husbands and/or in-laws and exhibited a tendency to indulge in behaviours that are unacceptable by law and society to gain and attain justice for themselves.

**Keywords:** Female Criminality, Domestic Violence, Social Suppression, Criminal Behaviour, Criminal Tendencies, Victimology, Criminology, Criminal Psychology, Forensic Psychology

## 1. Introduction

Criminality as well as the possibility to commit crimes is a gradual result of multiple complex issues and factors. Various criminological theories and theorists have postulated that causation of crime is indeed multidimensional could be viewed from innumerable viewpoints [1]. One such possibility of committing crime is that the person who himself is the victim, develops an attitude or tendency or merely thoughts of gaining justice on their own, through illegal means.

As rightly stated by Andrew Vachss, “*Today’s victim could be tomorrow’s predator*” [5]. The person who has been victimized through majority of the life end up being extremely vulnerable of becoming a future offender eventually. Various criminology, social and psycho-social theories exist that elaborate over the vulnerability factors of committing a crime. However, majority of these theories are androcentric in a way that they are formulated through research on male population by male researchers; and are then, (over)generalized for the females [3].

Typically, criminal violence is seen as a male prerogative. Even while this is generally the case, there is some evidence to show that the trend towards gender equality may also give women more opportunities to use violence. In the past, it has been frequently remarked that men and women commit crimes at different rates. The lower prevalence of reported crime perpetrated by women has historically been understood by those who blame societal conditions for crime because of their historically constrained social positions. Women today have access to a wider range of roles; therefore, it makes sense that their criminal violence will rise as well [4].

Hence, researches need to be conducted specifically for different genders especially in country like India, where there are different societal pressures, norms, gender roles and expectations from different sex. Along with this, the studies of victimizers have been limited to persons already within the CJS (Criminal Justice System) and more research needs to be conducted on the population which is highly susceptible and vulnerable to commit crimes in future. This could help the government as well as the judiciary to provide counselling and other mental health therapies along with proper guidance and knowledge to help in reducing the formation of future criminals and control crime rates

It could be seen from the NCRB data of 2018, 2019 and 2020, that the number of female inmates all over India was 19,242 in the year 2018 which rose to 19,913 in 2019 and further to 20,046 in 2020. Crime committed by women are drastically increasing which could have innumerable underlying reasons, conditions, and circumstances [8,9,10]. Therefore, it is essential for this area to be paid attention and identify/ allocate the ways to reduce and control crime along with reducing the recidivism rates.

Anchal Bhagat, a psychologist, asserts that social environment, particularly in patriarchal settings, has a key role in the development of female criminals. A woman's fate is irreversible, notwithstanding the Indian constitution's guarantee of equal rights and privileges. Despite her equal commitment and success in both her studies and her job, she does not receive the praise and respect she merits. Bhagat talked about how a victim could turn a victimizer by using Phoolan Devi, the bandit queen, as an example. Phoolan Devi was 11 years old when she wed a violent thug in his forties. After then, she experienced a string of mistreatment in her life, including domestic abuse, a marital rape, three weeks of gang rape, and public humiliation. She eventually turned into a dacoit to get her revenge [5].

In a study, researchers concluded that the main factors contributing to frustration and eventual criminal behaviour among Indian women were strained interpersonal relationships with their husbands and other family members, the husband's extra-familial relationships, and deprivation and denial of basic needs of life such as affection, security, etc. (Sharma, 1963)

Subject of female criminality is a neglected phenomenon and not much attention has been paid in this field which ultimately led to paucity of literary materials and theoretical frameworks on the female offenders [18]. The concept of “crime against women” is coming into frontline and gaining attention of the researchers because it is the need of the hour and because of the increase in awareness, programs, and policies but the “crime amongst women” is still a pending area which could be filled with ample of researches. Even if the researches do exist on the victim- offender cycle overlap amongst females, majority of them are from the context of western countries and very limited when it comes to Asia, or specifically India [7]. The patriarchal notion and the social suppression of women leads to ignorance of them being marginalized even in this field of research and development.

Moreover, the criminological studies that have been conducted in this field are more focused on the inmate population and are carried on the offenders rather than the victims [11]. Hence, the current research aims at providing supportive qualitative data in the field which could pave way for further researches and literature.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Aim and Scope**

The aim of the study was to assess the criminal tendencies in female victims of domestic violence and their possibility to commit crimes in future. The study was limited to assess the level of criminal tendencies in females who have been the victims of violence in domestic setup. The study expanded to the problem

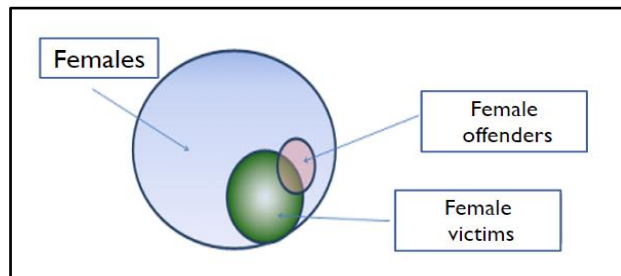
or the paved way of victim becoming the victimizer and how the violation of women in household becomes a contributing factor for them to become violent and aggressive enough to have thoughts and intentions of being an offender.

## 2.2. Research Questions

1. Is there a likelihood to commit crime in domestic violence survivors?
2. To what extent do they think that law is efficient in helping them gain justice?
3. Do they believe that social suppression and violent behavior towards females are contributing factors to female criminality?
4. Do they have criminal tendencies or show deviance from societal norms and values?

## 2.3. Sampling

**Figure 1: Sampling**



The Figure 1 depicts the population of the females (blue region), the female victims (green region) and the female offenders (pink region). The population which is overlapping and coinciding is the population of the victims who end up being the offender and committing crimes. This population is viewed as being more susceptible of committing crimes due to the feelings of aggression, revenge or as merely response to the continued ordeals faced by them. Hence, this is the universe of the study.

A non-probability sampling technique of purposive sampling was used where the people who fit appropriately to achieve the goals of the study were chosen by the researcher. As the research progressed, snowball sampling also became effective in obtaining data.

**2.3.1. Inclusion criteria:** Participant should be female victims who had been violated physically or emotionally in a domestic setup by their husbands and/or in-laws.

**2.3.2. Exclusion criteria:** Unmarried females or cohabiting females, male victims of intimate partner violence, females who are convicted of crime, LGBTQIA+ Community, homosexual relationships and victims of child marriage have been excluded.

## 2.4 Protocol

The participants were placed in a comfortable environment. The details of the case like type of violence faced, socio demographic details, injuries, level of emotional distress were pre-recorded with the help of organization and from the subject themselves. The subjects were ensured with confidentiality of the data provided as well as with their own safety. They were explained about the motive of the interview and the intent of arranging the same. Rapport was established to make sure that the subjects were comfortable in

answering honestly without any apprehension or judgment fear. Informed consent was taken care of and no participant was forced to answer or record their answers without prior consent. Relevant questions were asked and it was ensured that anything which could affect the emotional well-being or could trigger negative emotions in the subjects were not asked or mentioned to the subject in order to abide by the decorum, sensitivity, and research ethics. Insensitive questions were completely avoided. Subjects were given free choice of leaving the interview at any point of the time without any penalty or questioning.

## 2.5 Design and Procedure

The research was qualitative in nature and is a phenomenological study. A phenomenological study aimed at examining human experiences through the descriptions which are given by the people, called the lived experiences. The respondents were asked to describe their experiences and the information was gathered through interview. Interview schedule was formed and the data was collected using the prepared set of questions. The study was conducted on 15 females (N=15).

The research method that was used in the study was the semi-structured interview. The interviews were conducted on the females who have witnessed brutality from their husbands or in-laws. Few of them were enrolled in NGOs to avail various facilities, vocational training, and psychological therapy. All of them were divorced or separated and were not living in their husbands' households anymore because of the prolonged and constant ill treatment, trauma, violence, and turmoil. Their average age was found to be 36.5.

A thematic content analysis (deductive) was done to interpret the obtained data. Understanding the victim-offender cycle overlap and the possibility to commit crimes of the females who have been victimized were the main goals of the study. It used only qualitative approach for the collection of data from the samples. With the aim of ascertaining answers to the research questions, the data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The transcripts were coded and further the themes were identified to obtain global theme.

## 3. Results and Discussion

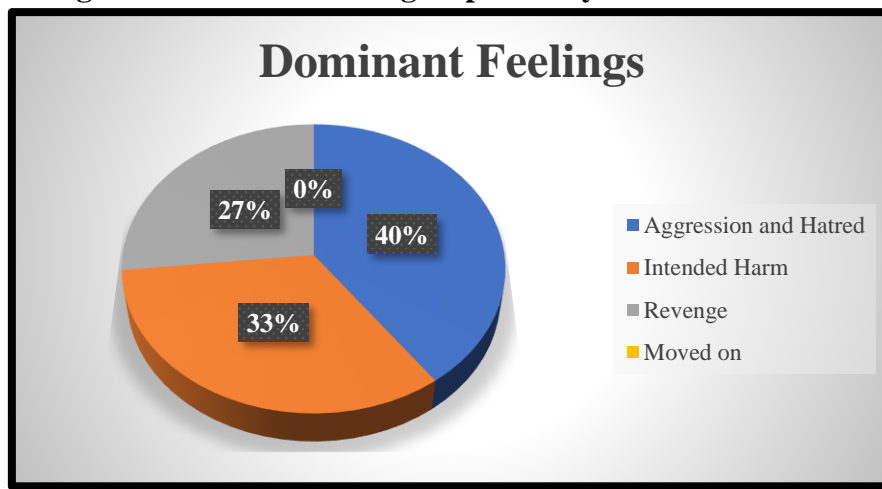
The data collected from the interviews of the 15 females was in a lengthy, narrative, and detailed form. Along with the relevant information which is necessary for this research work, avalanche of irrelevant information and detailed knowledge about the case was provided during the interviews as the subjects were asked open-ended questions. They gave long autobiographical narratives of the incidents suffered by them. Hence, data condensation was done to make it understandable, saturated, brief, and more accurate. However, the data was not paraphrased or interpreted according to personal knowledge or prejudices of the researcher as it would hinder with the validity and reliability of the data.

The females were victims of violence in domestic setup and were reluctant to speak and hesitant to share anything initially. But gradually after feeling comfortable and familiar with the need of the research, they gave detailed accounts of the happenings that took place. The survivors reported that they regret being married at the first place. They have a very aggressive and helpless outlook in life and tend to blame their husbands for spoiling their entire life. Some of them regret of not raising voice at the correct time when it was needed and continued to bear the torture just in the name of marriage and in order to protect the honor of the family as divorce is seen as a taboo in Indian society. They also blame the existing systems within the society for suppressing women and favoring men by viewing the physical harm caused by them as a sign of masculinity. They are been taught to remain unvoiced and perceive domestic violence as a very normal happening in Indian houses.

They confess that more than the regret, the feelings of aggression and intention to use violence which is almost equal to or congruent to what they have suffered, overpower them. The negative comments and the pre-conceived notions of the society even after being the victim and not the offender elevates these feelings. They feel that if the result of not doing anything socially or lawfully wrong, is trauma and disrespect, they should have probably done something wrong.

Hence, the responses obtained, when asked about the strongest and the most recurrent feeling(s) they hold towards their husbands/in-laws, were as shown in Figure 2:

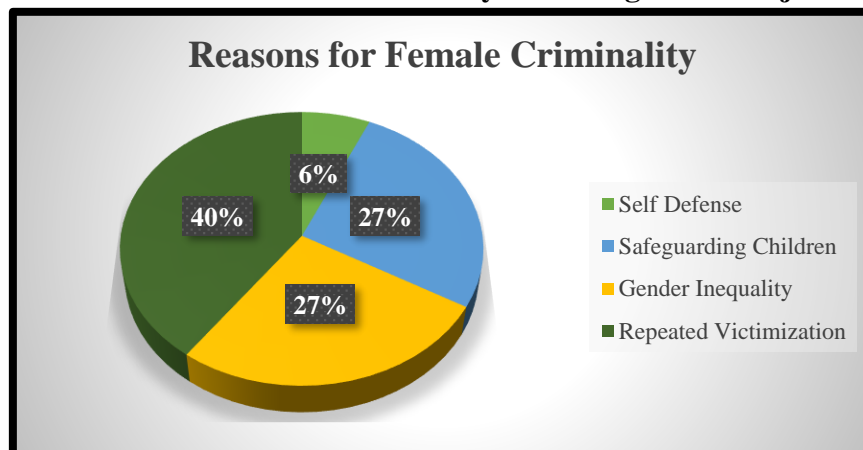
**Figure 2: Dominant feelings reported by the females**



Here (Fig.2), it could be clearly inferred that most of the participants have a strong ill-feeling for the people who have maltreated and exploited them. 33% of the population is violent enough to intentionally harm their exploiters back, proportionately, or equivalent to the harm they have suffered themselves. Even though the females have found out a better way of life and living a quality life, away from the ordeals they were facing in their married lives, they still have not moved on completely. None of them has forgiven their offenders enough to wish good will and happy living for them. They do possess a heavy feeling of their perpetrators being free of the charges even after their wrong deeds.

Furthermore, on being asked to judge the reasons of increasing female criminality in India and increase in the number of female prisoners in Indian prisons, following responses were recorded from the females:

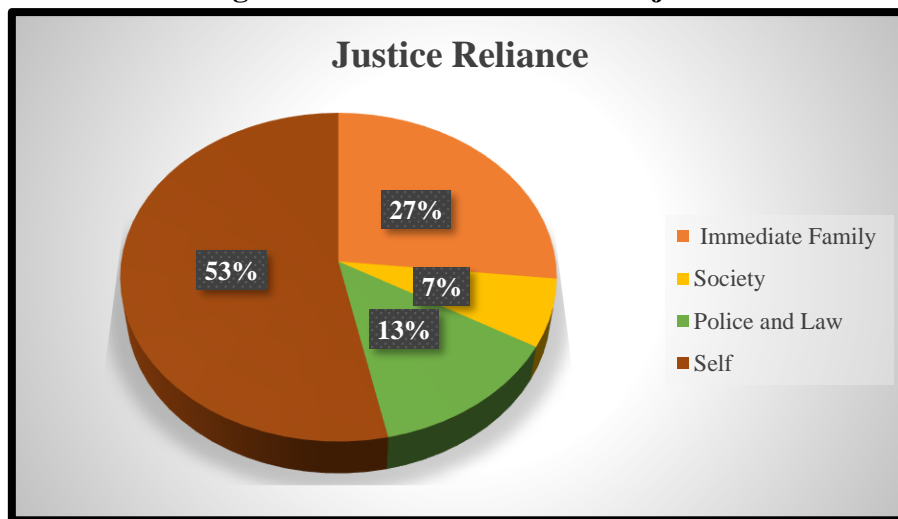
**Figure 3: Reasons for female criminality according to the subjects**



As it could be clearly seen in the figure that females believe it is the victimization of women that directed them to become repulsive, aggressive and fight back. This results, sometimes, in outburst of rage to end the sufferings all at once and indulge in criminal activities, either on the spot or pre-planned and plotted. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Women who were interviewed, are of the notion that there exists discrimination in the male-dominated society and all the decisions taken for women are thought from the male perspective. This is the reason for them, and many other women, of not getting justice that they deserve. They have their own notions of justice but most of them believed that they should be given chance to fight for themselves and gain justice on their own. They tend to rely on different forces for gaining justice and getting satisfaction for their mental peace.

The data was recorded in following way

**Figure 4: Justice Reliance in Subjects**



Hence, from the narratives obtained it can be seen that they now, after waiting for their immediate family members, trusting the moral society and requesting the police and law, strongly believe that one must not rely on oneself to ensure justice for the wrongdoings they have faced.

### 3.1 Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis of the condensed qualitative data was done. It aims at the identification of common themes and patterns of meaning that are repetitively present in the theoretical data. The thematic analysis began with familiarization of the data. The condensed data was closely analyzed and structured for further interpretation. Initial coding was done by identifying the recurrent words, meanings, and phrases from the transcripts.

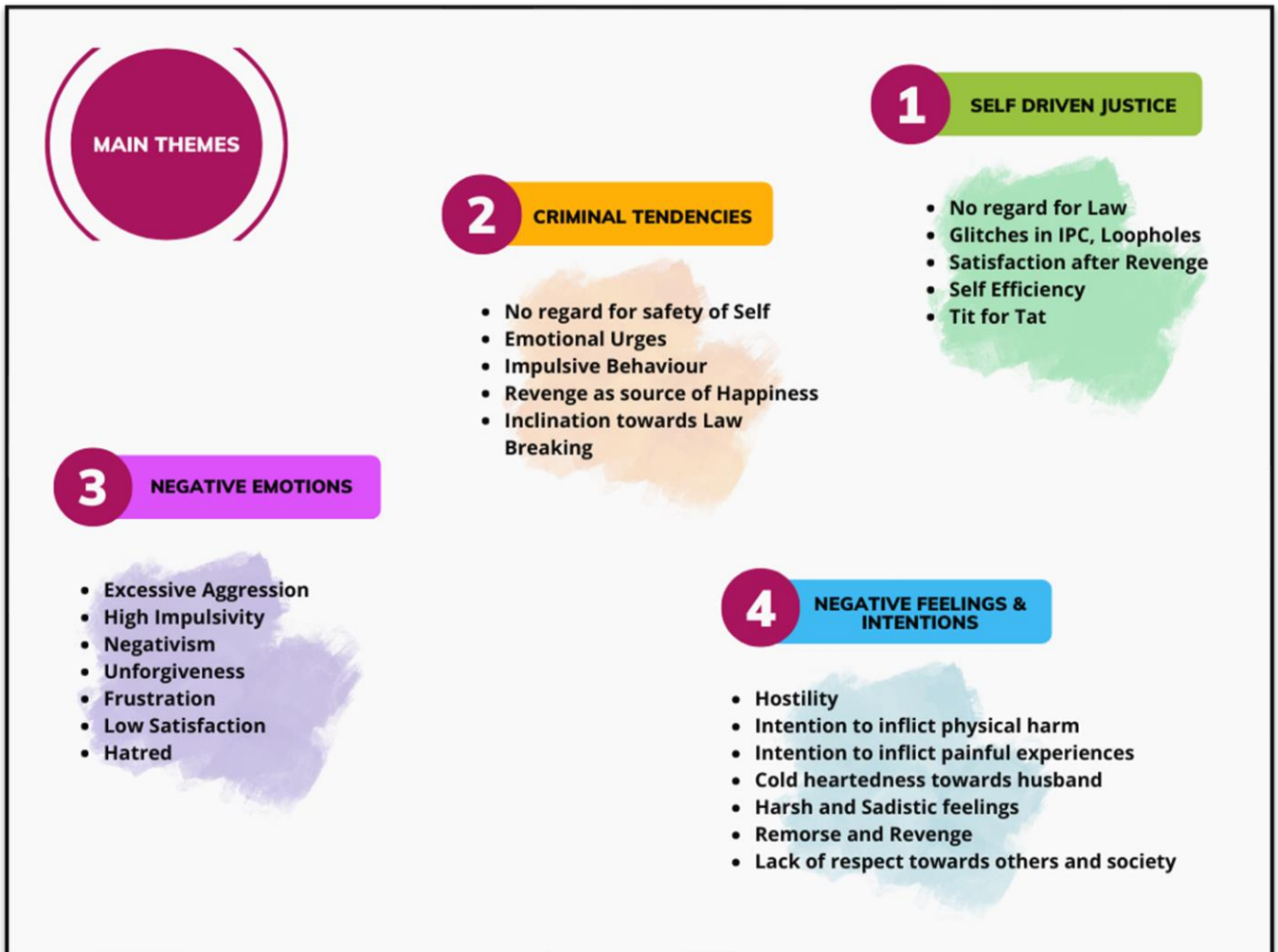
The identified codes were then clubbed under the umbrellas of sub themes and relevant main themes were driven out for them for the purpose of searching answers to the research questions. Phrases like “*I feel guilty*” and “*I am ashamed of being married*” were given the codes of GS i.e., Guilt and Shame. Phrases like “*I am not sure*” were coded under Uncertainty. “*I don’t think law is efficient to provide justice*” and “*Police cannot do anything in home matters as it always favors men*” were coded as Distrust in judiciary. The detailed identified sub-themes were as follows:

**Table 1: The Genres and underlying Sub-themes**

S.No.	Categories	Sub- Themes
1.	Attitude towards husband	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Unforgiveness</li> <li>-Responsible for spoiling life</li> <li>-Intention to cause physical harm</li> <li>-Inflict pain</li> <li>-Unregretful for separation</li> <li>-Aggression and hatred</li> <li>-Revenge</li> </ul>
2.	Attitude towards Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Self driven justice</li> <li>-Mistrust on judiciary</li> <li>-Satisfaction only after taking revenge</li> <li>-Mistrust on societal norms and law</li> <li>-Law favours offenders</li> </ul>
3.	Attitude towards Family, Society, Social Norms and Protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Low regard for societal norms</li> <li>-Low group cohesion and social conformity</li> <li>-Hostility</li> <li>-Held responsible for not reporting</li> <li>-Anger towards family members for no support</li> <li>-Responsible for suppression of women and ordeals faced by them</li> <li>-Divergent opinions and urge to indulge in deviant behavior deliberately</li> <li>-Aggression towards stereotypical thinking, judgments, prejudices, and societal expectations</li> <li>-Barrier in gaining justice and raising voice against wrong doings</li> </ul>
4.	Attitude towards the Incident	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Guilt of marriage and over attachment</li> <li>-Regret for not raising voice initially</li> <li>-Regret for not being violent and repulsion</li> <li>-Feeling of being a disgrace and shame for family</li> </ul>
5.	Reasons for increase in Female Criminality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Patriarchy</li> <li>-Suppression of women</li> <li>-Objectification of women</li> <li>-Reacting/Revolting back; Responding to men’s violence</li> <li>-Protection of self and children</li> <li>-Society telling women to be submissive</li> </ul>

These sub themes were interpreted and main themes were recognized from them. The main themes revolved around the epicenter of the research questions to get their answers and conclusions. Majority of the data was organized and included under these themes for the further conclusions to be made. The Main Themes were as follows:

Figure 5: Main Themes



The Figure 5 represents the main themes which were identified and combined from the originated sub-themes. The four main themes came out to be *Self Driven justice* (condensed from the sub themes of no regard for law, believing that there exist glitches in IPC and it favors the wrong-doer, self-efficiency in snatching justice, the strong support for the ideology of tit for tat ) , *Criminal Tendencies* (derived from the sub themes like reckless behaviour, no regard for safety, emotional urges, viewing revenge as the mere source of happiness and satisfaction, inclination towards breaking the laws and societal norms) , *Negative feelings and intentions* (combined from the sub themes like hostility, intentions to cause physical or emotional harm to the person, cold heartedness, harsh and sadistic feelings, revengefulness, lack of respect towards marriage and societal norms), and *Negative Emotions* (which was derived from the sub themes like expression of excessive aggression, high impulsive behaviours, negativism in every aspect of life, unforgiveness and no forgetfulness, high frustration and strong hatred, low satisfaction in life and so on) After the identification of Main themes, the organizational and global themes were figured out.



Figure 6: Basic Themes, Organizational Themes and Global Theme

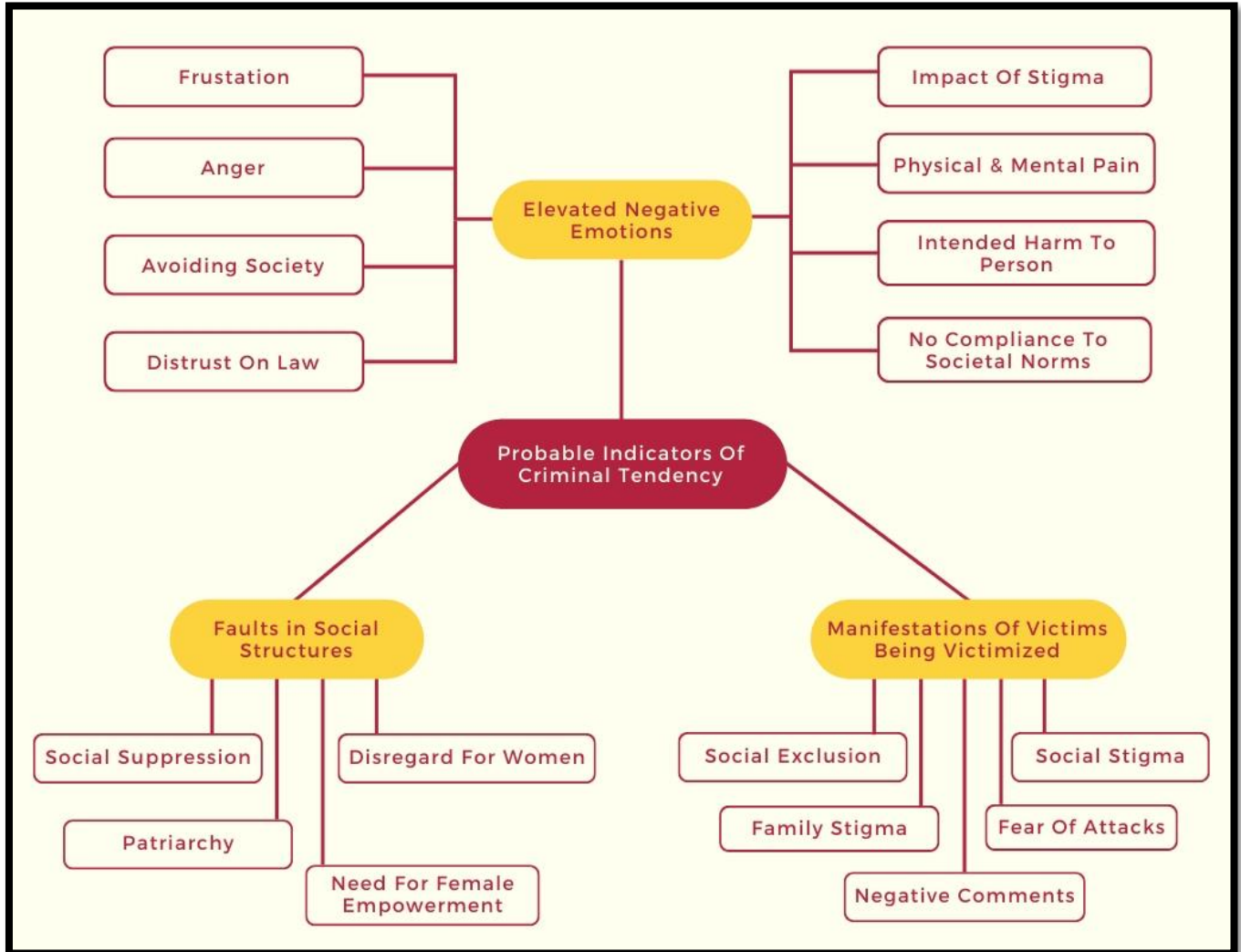


Figure 6 indicates the basic themes which were condensed to identify the organizing themes. These organizing themes were then presented as the Global Theme for the entire thematic analysis. The Global theme was found out to be the indicators of criminal tendencies in the given sample of females from whom the data was collected. The three Organizing themes are *Elevated negative emotions* (which covered the analysis of data that indicated frustration, anger, avoiding society, distrust on law, no compliance to society, law and social norms, intended harm, physical and mental pain, impact of social and family stigma), *Manifestations of victim being victimized* (Themes included were social exclusion, family stigma, negative comments and derogatory feelings from family and relatives, fear of attacks from the opponent and social stigma), *Faults in social structures* (Pulled out from the basic themes like social suppression leading to female criminality, patriarchy and stereotypical thinking, identified need for female empowerment and challenging the disregard for women).

Furthermore, a thematic map was designed to select those extracts which are truly representatives of the themes.

Figure 7: Thematic Map

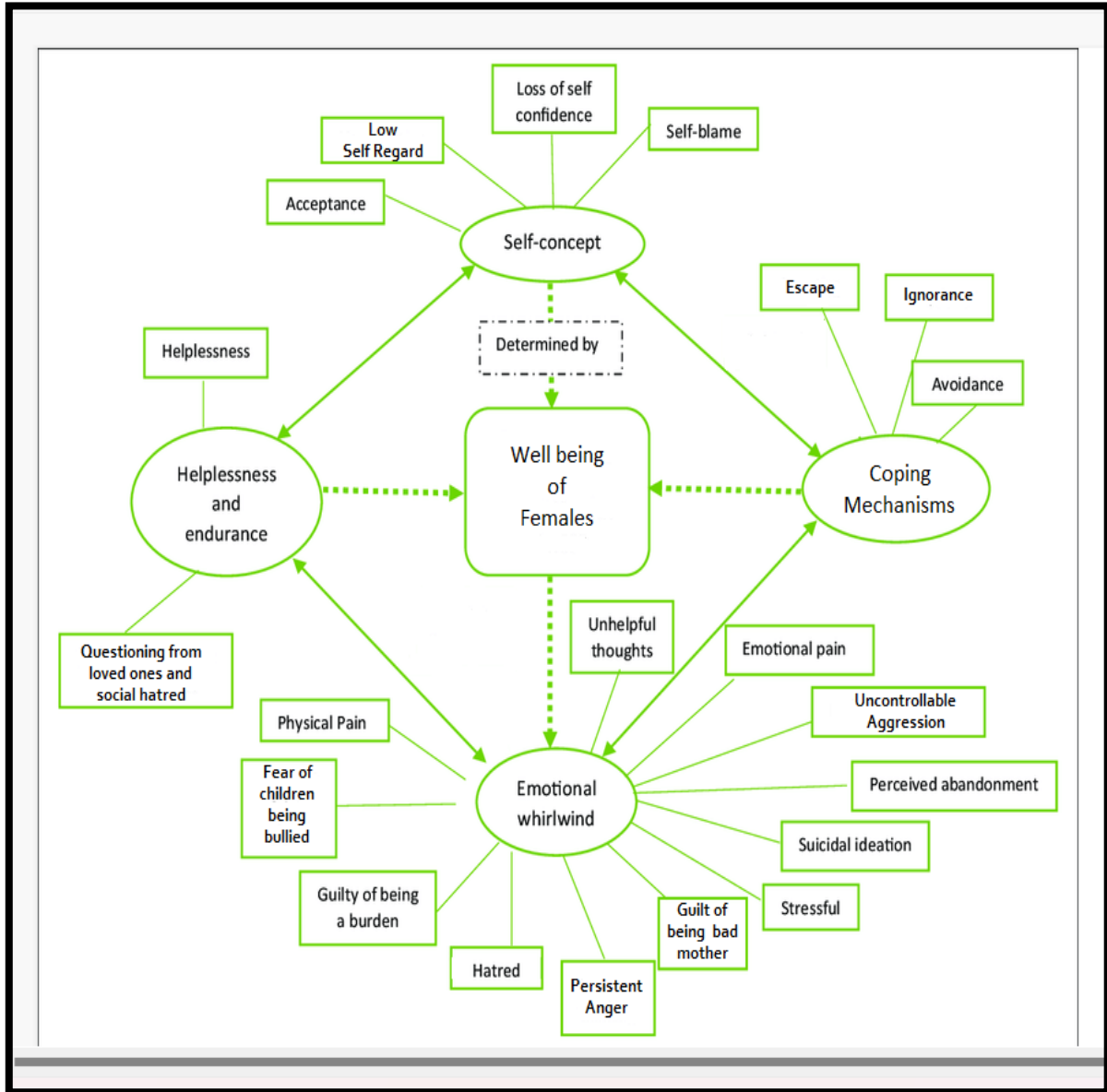


Figure 7 represents the impacted well-being of females. It depicts the emotional whirlwind, helplessness and endurance, Self-concept determined by their well-being, coping mechanisms used by them to deal with the ordeals of life.

Hence, the results after being analyzed thematically, yielded answers to the research questions propounded in the beginning of the research. It was found that the interviewed females do have intense feelings of sadness, reventfulness, and aggression towards what they have faced and that their children would have faced if they were not escaped. They believe that women face violence and harassment merely because of their gender and of the social notion that women are worthless, submissive, and made for sacrifices. It is the social suppression of women and patriarchal ideologies that pollute the well-being of women and restricts them from progressing even in this, so called, progressive world. They feel that justice delayed is justice denied and the female themselves should be given the opportunities and provisions to ensure and bag justice for themselves because, according to them, society and law is failing to do right for the women and rather, is favoring men who are the wrongdoers. According to them, female criminality will

automatically decrease if women will be given their rights, will not be suppressed on basis of gender and patriarchy, at least in the Indian scenario.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the field of Criminology and Forensic Psychology, the emerging and burning topic of increasing female criminality is gaining popularity and relevance. The reasons for the same could be innumerable but the research in the field is limited due to androcentrism. The social strain and anomie theory of defining criminal behaviour does focus on the conditions of the society that could result in emergence of such tendencies. Hence, this research is based on this field of psychosocial factors leading to criminality. As referred to the case of Phoolan Devi, constant violence and exploitation leads to rage, aggression, and outburst which intern led to criminal tendencies (Hoffman, 1972). The concept of “Victim turning Victimizer” was focused at and the research was conducted on female survivors of domestic violence. The thematic analysis of the transcripts of the interviews was done and the study attempted to evaluate whether there were criminal tendencies present in the domestic violence survivors. The results showed that they do indicate a possibility of indulging in social deviant behaviour and unlawful means to ensure that they get justice by giving adequate punishment to their husbands who had been torturing them since long time. However, conclusive, and sure statements cannot be made.

#### 5. Suggestions

The research will help in focusing on the gender differences in criminality and will widen the field for female perspectives and ideologies. It will help in drifting away the focus from male centric viewpoint and identify the reasons that could lead to increase in the number of female criminals. This will further help in predicting criminal behaviour and eventually in forming better and relevant interventions for the victims who are vulnerable and susceptible to commit crimes. It can also be conducted at a national level to get a wider perspective of the female criminals in India.

#### 6. Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

#### 7. Acknowledgment

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