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Female Crime and Delinquency: A Kaleidoscope of Changes at the Intersection of Gender and Age

Maria João Leote de Carvalho, Vera Duarte, and Silvia Gomes

ABSTRACT
This article discusses the role that gender and age play in female crime and delinquency in Portugal, drawing on the voices of female offenders across different generations—childhood, youth, and adulthood. Based on the analysis of 49 interviews with female offenders, it explores the ways in which these girls and women construct and account for their own criminal behavior. The results reveal a kaleidoscope of changes cutting across generational groups, punctuated by increasing involvement of younger groups in offending as a form of emancipation. Young and older female offenders show different patterns of offending, which reflect multiple and ambivalent old and new forms of femininity. Girls’ and women’s paths both to and in offending have their own idiosyncrasies. They also reflect the way gender is being constantly reconfigured and reconstructed through time, and in different social and institutional contexts.

INTRODUCTION
Gender is one of the most consistent differentiating dimensions in crime and delinquency studies (Belknap, 1996; Carlen, 1988; Faith, 1993; Gelsthorpe & Sharpe, 2006; Girschick, 1997; Krutttschnitt, 2016; Messerschmidt, 1997; Naffine, 1996; Painter & Farrington, 2004, Potter, 2015; Renzetti et al., 2012; Silva, 2008; Silvestri & Crowther-Dowey, 2008; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996; Vold et al., 2002; Walklate, 2004). The theoretical and empirical approaches to crime and delinquency have been based primarily on the analysis of male behavior in relation to the overrepresentation of men in the official crime statistics worldwide (Leonard, 1982; Renzetti et al., 2012). Consequently, traditional criminology studies reveal an androcentric character, which may bias research, and traditional analytical tools may thus be unsuitable for the study of crime in the female world (Kruttschnitt, 2016; Machado, 2008). Only from the 1970s onwards did more gender-sensitive literature appear with a feminist influence (Renzetti et al., 2012), focusing first on women (Adler, 1975; Carlen, 1983, 1988; Simon, 1975) and then, in the 1990s, on girls (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1992; Miller, 2001; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996).

For many years, criminologists neglected the topic of female crime and delinquency, treating girls and women with indifference (Vold et al., 2002; Zahn, 2009). For this reason, a single story...
around female crime delinquency was forged based on its invisibility and the reproduction of stereotypes (Duarte & Gomes, 2015). This single story involved seeing women and girls involved in criminal practices as deviating from the norm of the female gender, doing so because they were under the relational or romantic influence and dominance of men and boys. Additionally, by being involved in crime and delinquency, women and girls were breaking the norm of passivity and submission that was prevalent in the social construction of the gender role assigned to them. These actions caused such perplexity and difficulty to the understanding that they ended up being relegated from the norm of the feminine gender. Even the early work of feminist criminology (Adler, 1975; Carlen, 1983, 1988; Simon, 1975) sought only to fill in the gaps of traditional approaches without breaking away from the analytical and conceptual tools of the past (Vold et al., 2002).

Much has evolved since those times. Strong progress has been made in Western societies toward gender equality by eliminating sex discrimination from legislation and by taking measures to put into practice a gender equality agenda and policies for a more positive action. Portugal has been no exception (Monteiro & Ferreira, 2016). The role and status of girls and women has deeply changed, having evolved from the traditional view that promoted their submission to men in all spheres of social life toward a new gender equality policy. But these are not linear processes. Gender inequalities persist, even though women are represented in all domains of social life (Gender Equality Index, 2020; Waylen et al., 2013). Despite the deep change toward greater gender equality in public policy across Europe, in Portugal women are still more affected by low levels of education, unemployment, unpaid work and job insecurity, and the gender pay gap is present in all ages (Ferreira, 2019). Compared to other European countries, social inequalities are a distinctive image of Portugal, associated with high levels of poverty and social exclusion, most particularly affecting children and females (Carvalho, 2013, 2014; Cunha, 2002; Gomes, 2019; Granja, 2015; Matos, 2016; Silva, 2008).

Feminist approaches have developed within the framework of crime studies, undertaking a deconstruction of the established and dominant systems of thought and knowledge, while considering that social structures primarily reproduce a masculine view of the world (Chesney-Lind, 1997; Messerschmidt, 1997). Despite the deep changes regarding the role and social position of girls and women in society, social dynamics and the multiplicity of challenges and risks still influence gendered social roles and the construction of the female identity. The most recent feminist approaches emphasize multiculturalism, accentuating differences among women and girls in terms of class, race, ethnicity, age and experiences with crime, victimization and the justice system (Nowacki, 2016; Steffensmeier et al. 2017). Its origins are in black feminism and have been adopted and developed into an intersectional approach (Bardin Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991) to the understanding of crime and delinquency (Bloom, 1996; McCall, 2005; Messerschmidt, 1997) or intersectional criminology (Potter, 2015). In fact, social class, race, ethnicity, gender and age have been core points of focus within sociology and criminology studies for a long time, being understood as statuses that significantly affect behavioral outcomes. Intersecting these statuses in order to unveil how they shape inequality and those behavioral outcomes is, however, recent (Steffensmeier et al. 2017), especially in the criminology field (Potter, 2015).

In Portugal, the first studies on female crime and delinquency appeared in the 1980s and underwent a boom at the beginning of the millennium (Gomes & Duarte, 2018a). These studies focus on women in law (Beleza, 1993), women in prison (Carmo & Frágua, 1982; Cunha, 1994, 2002, 2010; Gomes & Granja, 2015a; Granja, 2015, 2017; Granja et al., 2013; Matos, 2008), the criminal trajectories of women in general (Leal, 2007; Pedroso et al., 2017) and of foreign and Roma women in particular (Esposito et al., 2020; Gomes, 2014, 2018, 2019; Gomes & Granja, 2015b; Matos, 2014, 2016, Matos et al., 2019), and violence and female juvenile delinquency (Carvalho, 2017, 2018, 2020; Duarte, 2012; 2017; Duarte & Carvalho, 2017; Duarte & Cunha, 2014; Duarte-Fonseca, 2000; Duarte & Vieites-Rodrigues, 2015; Pedroso et al., 2017). This boom
closely followed profound social changes in Portuguese society in terms of the nature and extent of female crime and delinquency, particularly in the two Metropolitan Areas of Lisbon and Oporto. In fact, the profound social inequalities in these particular geographical areas are an expression and provide a basis for understanding and analysis of the deviant and criminal involvement of particular groups, such as children and young people (Carvalho, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2019), ethnic minorities (Cunha, 2002, 2010; Gomes, 2014, 2019), and also females offenders (Carvalho, 2017, 2018, 2020; Cunha, 2002; Duarte & Carvalho, 2017; Gomes, 2018). In addition, the new nature of female crime can be observed in the role of women as offenders in extremely gendered crimes such as stalking, where traditionally we saw them as victims rather than perpetrators (Grangeia & Santos, 2018). As in other European countries, men over 20 years old are in the majority among the prison population in Portugal (Gomes et al., 2018). In terms of the representation of girls and women in the justice system, female offenders are therefore a minority (Gomes et al., 2018; Pereira & Correia, 2021) but their presence is increasing. In 2019, 11% of the juveniles detained in educational centers were girls (89% were boys) (Pereira & Correia, 2021), compared to 5.6% in 2005 (Gomes et al., 2018). Concerning the penitentiary system, in 2019 women represented 6.7% of the adult prison population (93.3% were men) (DGPJ, 2020; Pereira & Correia, 2021). However, the presence of female offenders in the penal system has been increasing in the last decade, with the numbers of female prisoners increasing from 613 prisoners in 2009 to 859 prisoners in 2019 (DGPJ, 2020; Gomes et al., 2018).

Despite the visible growth in female crime and delinquency studies in Portugal, these are still scarce in comparison with other countries (Pedroso et al., 2017, Gomes & Duarte, 2018a). This turns the discussion on the subject into an opportunity to acknowledge the need to elaborate on and rethink the categories of femininity and feminine violence, of crime and delinquency. It also draws attention to the many expressions and dimensions of female offending.

Based on an analysis of a unique data set that covers different generations, this article presents a comprehensive reflection focused on the place and the role that gender plays in female crime and delinquency, taking into account the voices and perspectives of girls and women who have offended in Portugal. Our aim is to focus on how their perspectives on their own criminal behaviors reflect multiple and ambivalent femininities (Gonick, 2004) across generational groups (Gomes et al., 2021a), while also focusing on the situations and relational processes that gender may bring to the foreground or, conversely, relegate to the background, when combining it with other important covariates (social class, urban territories and judicial responses).

Acknowledging how these girls and women understand their offending behaviors in their generational group—childhood, youth and adulthood—and how they relate to the social systems is a crucial step for revealing the place and the role that gender and other statuses play in female crime and delinquency, revealing changing modes of femininity (Bodgeon, 2014; Gonick, 2004). Furthermore, as much of the feminist criminological research on female crime and delinquency comes from Anglo-Saxon countries, and the gendered pathways to crime and confinement in particular come from the United States (Nuytiens & Christiaens 2016), this article intends to offer a valuable contribution to the extant literature on the subject, giving visibility to the research done in a country in Southern Europe. By doing so, it contributes to a deeper knowledge on this subject and can also lead to finding other ways of conceptualizing and reconfiguring how we think about social change and society (Gomes & Duarte, 2018a).

THE SINGLE STORY ABOUT FEMALE CRIME AND DELINQUENCY: LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Early feminist studies were highly critical of mainstream criminological theories because these were perceived as having little relevance for the understanding of the criminal behavior of women (Gomes & Duarte 2018a; Kruttschnitt, 2016; Machado, 2008). More recently, Kruttschnitt (2016)
discussed this question of generaliability—that is, whether the same theoretical constructs can explain both male and female offending. The author suggests that gender seems to be a scope condition that alters the processes of some mid-range theories, while core covariates of antisocial behavior seem to be gender invariant or where gender moderates a theory, but the predictors of some theories are gender invariant.

For decades, a single story has also been constructed about the relationship between femininity and criminal offense (Duarte & Gomes, 2015), marked by biases of various natures (gender, race and ethnicity, age, social class), which have had an impact on the application of judicial procedures and on the perpetuation of discriminatory situations (Holsinger, 2000; Hoyt & Scherer, 1998; Matos, 2008).

Studies show that in most crime categories the majority of offenders are men (Mallicoat, 2018), and this gender gap is only narrower for crimes such as property and drug-related offenses (Mallicoat, 2018; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). Differences in behavior between women and men in relation to crime, and girls and boys in relation to delinquency, are often explained in terms of a system of patriarchy, which establishes a gendered division of social roles and hierarchies, through which behaviors are codified as either masculine or feminine, functioning as such in the prevailing system of power relations between the sexes (Belknap, 1996; Matos, 2008). That is why men are perceived as subjects who are more likely to develop violent behavior (and, inherently, “criminals” or “delinquents”), while women are seen as more likely to be fragile and defenseless (hence, “victims”) (Beleza, 1993, 2002; Mallicoat, 2018; Potter, 2015; Renzetti & Curran, 1993).

Gender differences in socialization lead women and girls to greater compliance with social norms and to keeping a greater distance from risky behaviors (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1992; Holsinger, 2000). Likewise, women appear to be more subject to formal and informal social control and surveillance processes, which seem more likely to avoid deviant behavior (Vold et al., 2002). Women’s crime and girls’ delinquency are often underestimated (Silvestri & Crowther-Dowey, 2008) and relegated to the hidden crime figures (Duarte, 2012; Matos, 2008), which has repercussions in the way crime and delinquency are detected and treated. That is why Gelsthorpe (2010) states that studies similar to the one developed by Wacquant (2008), by shifting the focus of analysis to women, would lead to understanding whether or not there is gender inequality in the criminal justice system influencing the relationship between women and crime.

Feminist and gender studies reveal how the offending girl and woman are socially doubly deviant, because they deviate both from accepted social norms (by breaking the law) and from gender norms (which state how women should behave). This helps to understand the dominant social constructs of masculinity and femininity in law enforcement (Ballinger, 2007; Machado, 2008). In fact, literature has been showing how the courts judge women and girls according to a masculine model identified as the norm, not taking into account their different life experiences as a counterpoint to the experiences of men and boys (Beleza, 1993; Carlen, 2002; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Fonseca, 2008; Piquero et al., 2005). Recent studies on gender and sentencing disparities show that in general harsher sentences are imposed on male offenders (Pina-Sánchez & Harris, 2019), with females being treated more leniently by the court system (Goulette, 2015). However, this is not true for all types of crime nor for all female groups. Females face harsher sentences than males for particular types of crime, such as sex crimes, and specific groups of female defendants, such as black females, may find themselves experiencing cumulative disadvantage across the criminal court system and receiving harsher sentences than other females (Goulette, 2015). Therefore, it is clear that gender also impacts the way the juvenile and criminal justice systems respond to offenders of crime (Gelsthorpe & Sharpe, 2015), and much of this attention comes from social expectations about how females should behave (Mallicoat, 2018) and the social position these females occupy in society (Goulette, 2015).

Furthermore, it is important to consider that the social context in which females live and grow up can play a central role in their deviant and criminal path (Levy et al., 2020). For decades, girls
were absent from the focus of neighborhood studies; it was only recently that the role of neighborhood variables in determining gender differences in violence and delinquency gained more visibility (Kling et al., 2005; Goodkind et al., 2009; Zahn & Browne, 2009; Zimmerman & Messner, 2010; Fagan & Wright, 2012; Carvalho, 2013; Haynie et al., 2014; Lei et al., 2014; Schneider, 2016; Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000; Jacob, 2006; Mrug & Windle, 2009; Duarte & Carvalho, 2017; Sampson, 2019). There is strong evidence demonstrating the differences between girls who are exposed and girls who are not exposed to structural disadvantage and violence in the context in which they live (Augimeri et al., 2011). Based on the perspective of traditional gender roles, girls are less exposed to the street influences than boys because families place more restrictions and control on their actions (Chesney-Lind, 1997; Fagan et al., 2007). However, when exposed to community violence or abuse and maltreatment at home, girls are more affected than boys (Augimeri et al., 2011). Gender differences are also expressed in peer influence on delinquency (Piquero et al., 2005), mainly on violent offending, as females are more likely to be influenced by peer involvement in such practices than males (Zimmerman & Messner, 2010; Haynie et al., 2014). Zimmerman and Messner (2010) proved that neighborhood disadvantage increases exposure to peer violence and has a significant impact on girls’ violent offending, promoting the reduction in the gender gap at higher levels of disadvantage. Social disadvantage is manifested in a low level of confidence in relation to others, which reduces the neighborhood residents’ expectations of intervening in social control and also lowers their expectations of taking collective action regarding the socialization of children (Sampson, 2012). Intersecting age, gender and crime, life-course theory has been crucial in highlighting potential key turning points in the life trajectories of individuals (Laub & Sampson, 1993). For instance, both marriage and employment seem to benefit males more than females (Rodermond et al., 2016; Zoutewelle-Terovan et al., 2014), and female offenders have more difficulty in finding pro-social partners and employment that is meaningful and sustainable (Carbone-Lopez & Kruttschnitt, 2010; Cobbina, 2009; Estrada & Nilsson, 2012; Leverentz, 2006, 2014).

Additionally, gender differences are found in perceptual studies on friends’ delinquency, with girls being more susceptible to, and selective about, their peers, even in the context of violent offending, than boys (Haynie et al., 2005; 2014; Zimmerman & Messner, 2010). The majority of women in prison have experienced some form of abuse—physical, psychological or sexual—throughout their life trajectories and in many cases are victims of multiple long-term acts of violence (Mallicoat, 2018). What seems to be the same for both males and females are poor parenting, parental criminality and neighborhood disadvantage; all of these are strongly related to antisocial behavior in both social groups (Giordano, 2010; Moffitt et al., 2001; Zahn, 2009). While prevalence of offending in Western societies tends to increase from late childhood, peak in the teenage years (15–19 years) and decline afterwards in the early 20 s (Piquero et al., 2012), girls tend to peak earlier (Wong, 2012) and to desist from delinquency more quickly than boys; they are also less likely to victimize strangers, be involved in physical aggression or carry or use weapons (Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000).

In short, the single story of these women and girls seems to be linked to the effects of gender stratification and patriarchy on their life experiences and to a system that was designed to deal with men’s and boys’ problems and neglect women’s and girls’ needs. The emergence of a more gender-sensitive literature has been fundamental in constructing a new understanding of criminal and delinquent behavior, where the gender variable becomes an axis of analysis, allowing crime and delinquency to be conceptualized as a matter of gender and revealing important considerations about gender differences in offending. Women and men, and girls and boys, have many common risk factors; however, some factors have shown gender (Zahn et al., 2010; Wong, 2012) as well as age (Laub & Sampson, 1993) and spatial contexts idiosyncrasies (Zimmerman & Messner, 2010). Therefore, it is essential to consider the intersections of gender and age with other statuses such as social class, race and ethnicity to acknowledge how these intersections shed
light on understanding female crime and delinquency (Burgess-Proctor, 2006; Chesney-Lind, 1997; McCall, 2005; Messerschmidt, 1997; Nowacki, 2016; Potter, 2015; Steffensmeier et al. 2017).

When intersecting gender and age, for instance, females in different generations—childhood, youth and adulthood—do perceive their own deviant and criminal activity differently, either more in line with traditional ideals of femininity, revolutionizing these femininity ideals or having new ways of reconstructing these femininities. This is precisely the focus of our article, which aims at i) discussing the changing modes of femininity (Bodgeon, 2014; Gonick, 2004) associated with the delinquent and criminal practice across generations; ii) unveiling old and traditional modes of femininity while presenting new forms of femininity (Gill & Scharff, 2011; Messerschmidt, 2012; Talbot & Quayle, 2010), and iii) highlighting the social production and construction of gender in particular contexts and avoiding essentialism (Gill & Scharff, 2011).

**METHODOLOGY**

**The Study**

To explore the role that gender and age play in female crime and delinquency, this study draws on data collected from three data sets of research conducted in Portugal between 2007 and 2013, each covering a particular generation of female offenders. The central question of the current cross-analysis is: how do different generations of female offenders describe their offending behavior?

These different generations of female offenders are under different judicial systems, as Portugal has different legal responses to crime and delinquency. Since 1911, the minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR) has been 16 years, which is also the minimum age for criminal majority. Below the age of 16, it is not possible to sentence children and young people in criminal terms; they can only be subject to the enforcement of protection measures or educational guardianship measures. It is necessary to distinguish conceptually between delinquent practices and criminal practices, and consider the separate justice systems that focus on and deal with different law-breaking populations: (i) for children below 12 years of age who have committed an offense qualified by criminal law as a crime, the Law for the Protection of Children and Young People in Danger (LPCJP) is applied and can only be implemented in terms of protection measures by the local Commission for the Protection of Children and Young People or by the Family and Children Courts; (ii) those children between the ages of 12 and 16 years who commit an offense qualified by the criminal law as a crime justify another kind of intervention, of an educational nature, falling under a special law for juveniles called the Educational Guardianship Law (LTE); (iii) after children turn 16, the criminal law is applied, although young adults, aged 16–21, can be subject to a special criminal law regime, while still being regarded and tried as adults. The Portuguese juvenile justice system differs from that of most other EU countries, placing less importance on the offense than on the need for the offender to be educated on the fundamental community values that were violated by the illicit act. The Portuguese juvenile justice system could be described through what Bailleau and Fraene (2009, 6) considered a “tendency towards bifurcation—a soft approach in most cases and tougher actions against a limited number of adolescents undergoing a custodianship order.” On the other hand, the penal system presents a somewhat different scenario. According to the latest data available in the Council of Europe Penal Statistics—SPACE I (Aebi et al., 2016), Portugal has a total prison population rate of 138 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants. This, in the European context, positions Portugal as a very punitive country regarding criminal law enforcement (Gomes et al., 2018).

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1Thus, at the national level, it is not possible to talk about juvenile ‘crime’, except for acts committed by people over 16 years old, when they are already considered criminally liable (see clarification by Duarte & Carvalho, 2017; Carvalho, 2015, 2018).
By covering the involvement of different generations in delinquency and crime—young girls experiencing their childhood, teenagers their youth, and women their adulthood—and diverse social contexts, encompassing urban territories and judicial systems, we aim at exploring how female offenders do gender and perceive themselves as offenders in different stages of their lives.

**Data Collection**

For this purpose, a unique corpus of analysis was created drawing on three subsamples of data collected from female offenders in 3 research projects conducted in different contexts, following particular strategies for data collection.

Study 1 (subsample 1) was conducted between 2007 and 2010. Eighteen girls, aged 7–11, of which 11 under child protection community measures, who lived in six public housing neighborhoods in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, were interviewed. The aim was to understand the socialization processes of children in multi-problematic spaces and their involvement in delinquency. The interviews were conducted in the context of neighborhood schools and leisure activities, such as extracurricular activities in neighborhood associations, after having obtained the informed consent of their legal guardians and their own. Within the framework of childhood studies (Christensen & O’Brien, 2003; Parkes, 2007; Punch, 2002; Shuval et al., 2012; Wells, 2005), rather than establishing a rigid interview guide on a sensitive topic, the strategy that was followed was that of raising questions about their lives in the neighborhoods to strike up a conversation. A familiar and adapted language was used with the aim of providing a space for the girls to speak freely. In most cases, this led to availability and interest in continuity and deepening of the issues under discussion. Before entering the field, the researcher established a set of procedures to be put into practice, considering the responsibility to protect the children and the researcher–participant relationship (Danic et al., 2006; Mayall, 2002).

In the second study (subsample 2), between 2008 and 2011, semi-structured interviews were conducted to 19 girls in order to explore the experiences and meanings of transgression in the life trajectories of female offenders. Of those 19 girls, 10 were placed under measures involving deprivation of liberty in custodial institutions (educational centers) and 9 were serving educational community measures, both supervised by the Directorate-General for Reintegration and Prison Services (DGRSP). At the time of the research, there was only one mixed educational center in Portugal, with a female residential unit for 12 girls. Concerning local DGRSP services, the researcher was authorized to have access to information and to conduct interviews only with girls in the Lisbon area. 19 convicted girls, aged 14–18, were interviewed.

Study 3 (subsample 3) was conducted between 2009 and 2013, and in it (foreign) convicted women serving a prison sentence in two female prisons were interviewed in order to understand the intersectional mechanisms that lead these women to crime and prison. The interviews were conducted in the two female prison facilities after the DGRSP services granted access to those institutions. The individual files of all the foreign women prisoners from the nationalities under study were consulted, and the women to be interviewed were selected based on the crime for which they had been convicted (different crimes, if possible), the length of the sentence (serving time for more than 2 years and with different lengths), recidivism (recidivist and non-recidivist) and age (including younger and older prisoners). Twelve convicted women, aged 20–49, were interviewed.

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2 We have favoured open questions as opposed to closed ones, because they allow children greater to express their convictions, opinions, thoughts and feelings. Their involvement in offending arose spontaneously as a feature of their description of their lives.

3 This is the auxiliary body of the judiciary administration responsible for the enforcement of juvenile justice measures, as well as criminal justice measures.
For the purpose of this study, and to allow comparability, the corpus of analysis was created based on analyzed data obtained from those studies via a common research technique—semi-structured interviews. We focused only on data related to how female offenders view their experiences and involvement in delinquency and crime and on contextual information about the social processes that structure and shape these deviant gender experiences.

**Ethical Procedures (in Data Collection)**

For all studies, an ethical protocol was applied articulating the rights of the research participants and the researchers’ rights and responsibility (Gomes & Duarte, 2018b). Data collection procedures were approved by the national funding agency FCT—Foundation for Science and Technology and by the academic institutions where the three research projects were conducted: see study 1, Carvalho (2010); study 2, Duarte (2012); and study 3, Gomes (2014).

Informed consent was obtained in the three groups of girls and women in accordance with the following procedure: (i) providing oral and written explanations of the study’s objectives, the risks and benefits for the participants and the participants’ rights, the types of data to be collected and further data analysis to be carried out, and the researcher’s commitment to maintaining data confidentiality and providing all the information requested by the participants, and (ii) collecting the participants’ signature on an informed consent form.

According to Portuguese law, for participants under the age of 18, the researcher had to explain the project beforehand to them and to their parents or legal guardians, who had to give permission. Letters of consent were sent in order to permit those girls’ participation, and through informed consent they expressed their willingness to take part in the research.

Interviews were conducted in compliance with the Code of Ethics of the International Sociological Association and with the requirements of the applicable legislation, particularly regarding data protection, data retention and the guarantee of the participants’ privacy and voluntary participation. The use of the tape recorder was subject to the participants’ prior authorization. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy by the authors.

**Sample Characterization**

The data set covers data selected from a total of 49 interviews with female offenders, aged 7 to 49, from diverse educational, family and ethnic backgrounds, as well as types of crimes and formal social control measures as presented in Table 1.

The majority of the female offenders had completed primary and middle education (41) and lived with their nuclear family (19). These low educational qualifications reflect the sample of the young age groups, in subsamples 1 and 2 (18 out of 18 and 19 out of 19, respectively), as well as the poor educational background in the older female group, in subsample 3 (4 out of 12). However, adult female offenders who had completed secondary and college education are also part of subsample 3 (5 out of 12). Although overall the nuclear family is the most prominent, in subsample 2 the most common household situation is living with a stepfamily (9 out of 19 young female offenders). In terms of ethnicity, the majority of the female offenders is white (25) or black (23). In subsample 1, the young female offenders are predominantly black (12 out of 18), while in subsample 2 they are mostly white (13 out of 19).

In relation to the types of crimes, there is a clear difference in pattern between the young and the older female offenders. The young female offenders mostly committed crimes against persons, namely offenses against physical integrity (13 female offenders, of which 4 in subsample 1 and 9 in subsample 2) and crimes against property such as theft (13 female offenders, of which 11 in subsample 1) and robbery (11 female offenders, all of which in subsample 2). On the other hand, the older female offenders were mostly incarcerated due to drug trafficking (11 female offenders
For these crimes, 11 (out of 18) females in subsample 1 were under child protection community measures; all (19) females in subsample 2 were deprived of their liberty, under custodial measures; and all (12) females in subsample 3 were in prison.

### Data Analysis

The interviews with different generations of female offenders from the three studies constituted the corpus of analysis and were submitted to a qualitative content analysis. The steps

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<th>Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of the sample.</th>
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<td><strong>Formal social control measures</strong></td>
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**Note:** The number of offenses is higher than the number of participants, as some participants were involved in more than one deviant or criminal act.

**Sources:** Interviews conducted with female offenders in the three studies as well as individual files (XXX, ZZZ and YYY).
followed for the content analysis were those suggested by Bardin (1995): (i) pre-analysis of the corpus, in which the selected 49 interviews from the three subsamples were carefully read; (ii) material exploration, in which all the interviews were reread and, in those parts particularly related to how female offenders view their experiences and involvement in delinquency and crime, along with contextual information to structure and shape these experiences, main sub-themes were identified and the recording units were defined across subsamples; (iii) coding, in which the recording units were identified, classified and aggregated into the sub-themes based on their contents; and finally (iv) data interpretation and discussion. To ensure the validity and reliability of the content analysis, each researcher coded interviews from one subsample, and then the other two researchers served as independent judges for the other subsamples (Bardin, 1995).

In the second stage of the content analysis, the material exploration was conducted at three levels. Initially, it was analyzed by subsample, within each study, and afterwards compared to the other subsamples in a continuously interactive process. Moving back and forth between the data sets demonstrated the complementarity of the data gathered from each study and allowed for the definition of the sub-themes cutting across all generations. Comparisons were drawn highlighting similarities and divergences among each subsample and later among participants. To ensure saturation, the data was later examined by participants, which was more challenging, as some individuals addressed each theme while others did not.

This option allowed us to draw a picture of each sample individual’s experiences. Three sub-themes were identified that could each be located within one overarching principal theme: understanding female offending in relation to the offender’s age, which in turn is related to shifts in gender roles over time.

The results section below describes and discusses each of the sub-themes, drawing on illustrative quotes from the transcripts across generations (and subsamples), starting with the younger generations of children (subsample 1) and young people (subsample 2) and moving toward the older one of adults (subsample 3).

For ethical reasons, to protect the participants and guarantee their privacy and anonymity, the names of the girls and women have been replaced with alphanumeric codes in this paper. Since these exploratory qualitative studies focused on three specific contexts at a particular time, the findings cannot be generalized and applied to other settings. Nonetheless, they do offer key elements for the understanding of female crime and delinquency across generations while maintaining their context-specific richness.

RESULTS

Three overarching sub-themes were identified through the content analysis of the interviews. The first one is the spatial concentration of these females in certain geographical urban areas and how that interferes with the risk of and opportunities for deviant and offending behavior. The second one is focused on the traditional female roles and offending experiences across generations, with evident similarities and differences among generational groups. The third sub-theme focuses on the new femininities, the changes in female roles in the context of deviant and criminal activities, evidencing how these are being reconfigured over time.

Spatial Concentration and Risk of Female Deviant and Offending Behaviour

The spatial concentration of social disadvantage in their places of residence is a key feature of the participants’ lives. These girls and women indicated living in territories where positive opportunities were more reduced than in other differentiated residential settings. Social disadvantage is reflected in high rates of poverty, unemployment and dependence on social/financial state
benefits, strong residential mobility, and low educational and professional qualifications. Moreover, all of them stressed the weight of the stigma they felt every time they needed to socialize outside the boundaries of these territories, in search of a job or a new school or even to appear before the police or in court. For instance, one of the girls in subsample 1 said:

I think... and I do not think that being a child in this neighborhood is different from living in other places. I think it's good because now and then you get along with other people and learn good things. But other times I think it is not good to be a child here because I see the boys smoking, doing crap and they try to steal and then they will grow up like the others doing wrong things. I think the girls are less naughty [laughs]! The boys like to go out at night and do other crap. Girls... only a few do the same, we are more timid. (...) But some girls are really rude and also go in the same way as the boys ... (Girl F01, 9 years-old) [subsample 1]

They recognize that a greater effort has to be made in order to be socially accepted and seen as non-deviant, since the media regularly presents these places as criminogenic (Carvalho, 2013, 2014; Levy et al., 2020; Sampson, 2012; Wacquant, 2008). This is a common idea for these younger girls; the social disadvantage in their lives places them at greater risk of being involved in deviant and offending behavior, substance use, risky sexual behavior, running away from home and/or being subject to multiple forms of victimization (physical, psychological, sexual and financial, among others) (Duarte, 2012).

In subsample 1, the girls were mostly involved in offenses against property, primarily through shoplifting in commercial spaces, most of which located near their neighborhoods, or through involvement in acts causing damages in schools or public spaces. Basic goods, such as clothes and accessories, including earrings, bracelets or school supplies, were the main target. Other girls were involved in offenses against physical integrity, specifically aggressions against other female children living in the same context. All of the offenses committed by this younger generation happens in groups, mainly female groups, including peers and/or older girls/young adults. Aggressors and victims tended to share a common and close relational context, as all the children knew each other from the neighborhoods and were familiar with the spaces in which the offenses were committed.

The social context and the risky activities experienced by girls and women, even before being involved in delinquency or crime or coming into contact with the justice system, seem to cut across all ages. If the girl's experimentation falls within what is considered normal for the age group in question, other risks are still raised.

Young girls reported the use of physical violence as a resource for self-defense and social inclusion in the territory in which they live. This may partially explain the "normalization" of violence they are often subjected to in their contexts of origin and to which they felt the need to react in a similar way.

Yeah! All the people go fighting here, there is always someone against me and (...) Bang! There she goes! I give her a hard punch too! (Girl F06, 8 years old [subsample 1]).

This girl's downplaying of the seriousness and effects of violence is based on the widespread nature of offending behavior against physical integrity, which leads to the perception that acting violently is acceptable and could be a means to earn respect. From the outset, the social development of girls through violence structures the way they will interact and affects their present and future roles in society (Carvalho, 2013).

Furthermore, these are stigmatized social contexts, closely surveilled by the public opinion and by the actors of the justice system. Thus, residents could be at greater risk of being more easily brought into contact with the police authorities or detained. While decades ago women were not seen as "criminals" and thus escaped the monitoring of the justice system, this attitude has changed drastically, and women are now also being implicated in the war on drugs based on the drug territories (Cunha, 2005, 2010; Matos et al., 2019).
When I started [trafficking], there were a lot of dealers. And since the police did not search women at that time, they only searched men, I was a drug courier. (...) I did it for 10 years… (ES3, 41 years old [subsample 3])

Therefore, regardless of age, girls and women are at a higher risk when living in these social contexts, either because they actually end up participating in the drug trafficking, or—and this is the main reason—because they are subject to the risks associated with it (e.g. violence among dealers, debts and police corruption, among others).

I sold [drugs]. Why did I sell them? I know why I am not going to sell anymore. I live in the “hood (...) everyone sells there. I am not going to be the one saying that it is Pedro or Manel. (...) Police know the people that sell, people that keep [drugs], people that buy; the police know everything! What can I do? I cannot do anything! I cannot say anything. Because if I say something, you think I am out of here alive?” No, he orders to kill me! Are the police going to stop him from killing me? (...) The police will pick me, because I am fragile and I don’t have a family, don’t have someone. If I was someone else, I would not be in prison! (ES4, 44 years old [subsample 3])

Traditional Female Roles and Offending across Generations

Besides the geographical contexts where these girls and women come from, which influence considerably the risk and opportunities for offending, the female roles performed by different generations also help understand their deviant and criminal activities.

Young girls continue to see familial responsibilities and domestic roles as belonging to women, and they justify the greater control parents tend to have over girls’ lives based on gender.

I used to cook dinner and gave it to my grandmother around seven and then I returned to the street. (E3, 18 years old [subsample 2])

A girl (...) she stays at home, works, she’s a mother (...). (E8, 16 years old [subsample 2])

He’s a boy, it’s normal, they begin to go around in groups at this age, (...) but for a girl (...), that is just not right. (E8, 16 years old [subsample 2])

As suggested by Silva (2010), girls tend to be mainly represented in terms of gendered pathways marked by cornered routes. This means they “have in common the weight of family responsibilities that require them to cut ties with the worlds of youth and school. (...) They are recruited by families for activities related to care” (p. 155). This naturalized gender vision extends to their definition of a mother’s role and serves to address the experience of motherhood and how it could effect “change” in a delinquent pathway.

Mom is kissing, embracing, changing diapers (...) the father is more the authority, imposing order. (...) My experience of being a mother made me see the world through others’ eyes. If it wasn’t for my son, I would be, once again, in a drug addiction phase. (E14, 18 years old [subsample 2])

This mother role or the activities related to care are, however, what is presented to explain, at least to a certain extent, the criminal behavior in adult women, particularly the foreign women prisoners interviewed in subsample 3. The criminal activity conducted by these women is pointed out as having its basis on the need to take care of their children and husbands or other members of the family that they assume to be under their responsibility. This happens either because they live in situations of poverty and economic vulnerability, in their home countries or in Portugal, or due to other social events that change their availability to financially support their families (e.g. husband’s and son’s imprisonment, children going to college, etc.).

I have two children, I do not have a husband … there is no work, I do not know. I needed the money; I have no job, nothing. I needed food and children’s clothing … (ES1, 29 years old [subsample 3])

Because I wanted my daughter to go back to school and to get a degree. And that’s it. I wanted to improve her life (...) I was working at that time, but it was not much [money], I could pay the rent, the water and
the electric bills and food but nothing else. And even for these things sometimes I did not have the money. (ES2, 41 years old [subsample 3])

Therefore, whether in youth or in adulthood, we find that female narratives are strongly infused with traditional gender roles. Women deem to be central in explaining their criminal involvement aspects such as motherhood or activities related to care. We cannot, however, dissociate these aspects from the structural social inequalities based on class and gender, nor from the risks associated with the social contexts in which these women.

These women are not solely performing their role as mothers and “carers”; they are also being influenced by their social position, which does not allow them the means to be able to perform their assumed roles. At the same time, they are under particular surveillance in specific neighborhoods associated with drug trafficking. The relationship between motherhood, crime and imprisonment has been discussed by several authors (Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Granja, 2017; Matos, 2016), who have pointed out that the responsibilities of childcare combined with situations of economic inequality and marginalization lead some women to certain crimes, such as drug trafficking. Therefore, the gender naturalization of traditional gender roles is visible in the motivations presented for crime involvement. There are conformity narratives regarding gender roles, which focus the narratives of these women on family and their central role in taking care of it (Gomes, 2018; Gomes et al., 2018).

Changes in Female Roles in Deviant and Criminal Activities

Although female participation in delinquent and criminal activity is not a recent phenomenon, there seem to be new ways in which the younger and older females participate in those activities, build gender relationships and orchestrate various forms of femininity through their delinquent and criminal practices. Considering the cross-cutting trends in terms of female crime and delinquency, what became evident for analysis were the new femininities that permeate different generations.

When the young people in subsample 2 spoke about their offending behaviors, they showed that they were not passive. They did try to conquer the social ground that opened up for them, creating forms of femininity and actually assimilating forms of masculinity too, as claimed by Miller (2001), challenging the ideas of society about what is traditionally appropriate for girls. These practices were also seen as “a girl thing” and “girl’s business” by the younger females interviewed in subsample 1.

Do you know a group [of four young adult females] called the Gang of the [name of a famous clothing brand]? They bring me clothes, but my mother [who is living abroad] tells me not to accept [them] because if I have a lack of clothing, it is because I damage it. She always brings a suitcase of clothes. (…) They are smart; they have a “silver suitcase” [lined with aluminium foil and silver inside] to pass the alarms without being caught. One is my aunt and they do not give clothes to others in the neighbourhood, they only give it to me; to the other girls, they sell at the same price. (…) People here buy a lot. (Girl F27, 11 years old [subsample 1])

These younger girls speak about other forms of femininity (Duarte, 2012). “Tomboy,” which represents a speech of equality, showing that they can perform similar acts to those practiced by boys (Fonseca, 2009, p. 267). Or “rebel” forms of femininity expressed in terms of more reactive identities and cultures of experimentation and provocation.

These forms of femininity, however, combine conventional and atypical gender practices. As Duarte (2012) and Duarte and Carvalho (2017) mention, in this form of self-empowerment, expressed in the need for freedom, autonomy and independence, it is not imperative that girls infringe or reject all traditional feminine roles. The girl’s offending and deviant behavior, such as running away from home, experimenting with alcohol and drugs and committing crimes, does not necessarily clash with the views that they have on gender roles.
For older females, it is important to note that, although there is a visible gender naturalization of traditional gender roles in the motivations presented for crime involvement among the foreign women under study as well as certain conformity narratives regarding gender roles (as presented above), they do break their gender roles and reconfigure them within their families. They do so either by immigrating in order to change their situation and that of their family (Matos, 2008) or by involving themselves in criminal practices and being the main leaders in their own and their family’s trajectory.

On that day, I only thought about paying the water, electricity and gas bills so they would not be cut off (…). “And I went … [to deliver the substance across the river]. After all, it was not a big deal. And then everything happened…” (ES5, 31 years old [subsample 3])

I had my three children in school (…) What did I do? I knew the men who provided the drugs. One of them called me and I immediately said “yes”. I started selling, I was selling it myself. That’s why I am here. (ES3, 41 years old [subsample 3])

My grandchild was sick and needed surgery (…) I was without a job for three months (…). “A friend, she and her husband were looking for someone to do it, so I did it without hesitation.” (ES6, 48 years old, [subsample 3])

These women knew what they were doing when they decided to involve themselves in criminal practices\(^4\), mainly drug trafficking. Even as they were compelled by their objective living conditions, their well-being and that of their families was worth the risk, which assumed an empowering and central role in their lives and in the lives of their families.

Another key finding relates to the intergenerational transmission of crime, a subject that has been extensively described in scientific research (Gomes et al., 2021b). In the younger girls’ narratives, a genderized process of social learning in delinquency is identified. The transmission of delinquent values tends to occur within the matriarchal family context under the direct influence of relatives of the same gender—mothers, aunts, girl cousins, grandmothers and sisters.

We talked to the mother of [Girl F35, 9 years old] and she explained everything. She put on the clothes, picked up her clothes, put on the clothes in the [shop] and then she told us to do what she was doing. She told us to take something off (…) that (…) the alarm tag. Her mother taught us, do it like this with your teeth (…). We managed to get it off, one took it off and we put on the clothes (…). Her mother told us, and she told us to go because there are stolen clothes at home and some bought, but most were stolen and then the case went to the court once. (Girl F27, 11 years old) [subsample 1]

When a girl offender’s family is also involved in crime and delinquency this could become an intergenerational problem, passed from one generation to the next, within a process of social reproduction similar to that of other social problems (i.e. poverty, social inequalities and exclusion).

**DISCUSSION**

The different female generations in this study assumed a kaleidoscope of old and new forms of femininity. Delinquent and criminal behavior was not seen by these girls and women as an act of rejection of their femininity and gender roles (Duarte & Carvalho, 2017), nor was it a resource for performing masculinity— on the contrary, the offending behavior was a resource for “doing gender” (Kruttschnitt, 2013).

While the younger female generations (children and young people) under analysis remain active and seek to conquer the space that opened up for them, they do not forsake traditional gender roles and tend to reproduce social constraints. Although the girls’ protagonism draws

\(^4\)Only one of the women who were interviewed clearly stated that she was not aware of the crime, as she was caught in a car with her ex-partner while he was transporting drugs. She ended up being convicted for drug trafficking and being accomplice to the crime. For more information on this particular case, please see Gomes (2014).
attention to their participation in delinquency, the worth of their own words in expressing how social gender inequalities affect the female condition, even today, should not be underestimated. Providing space for contexts in which females emerge as aggressors makes the social dynamics of which many of them are still victims even more visible. The girls in subsamples 1 and 2 do not reject conventional values. Nevertheless, offending can emerge as an attractive form of socialization in socially disadvantaged contexts, varying from what is seen as playing to the need to obtain social recognition or even to defend themselves from others.

Gender assumes another expression, which is particularly visible in the case of the victims of the younger girls, who are also female. This could be regarded as a sign that these girls begin, at early an age, to perceive females as more vulnerable and are able to incorporate this understanding into their own offending behavior, as other studies have been pointing out (Burman, 2004; Burman et al., 2001; Duarte & Carvalho, 2017; Duarte & Cunha, 2014). Furthermore, those who are aggressors can then become victims at the hands of older girls, in what seems to be a social reproduction of gendered violence patterns among females.

In the case of the adult female generations, traditional gender roles such as motherhood or the activities related to care were presented as explanations for their criminal involvement, in line with other studies that show how the responsibilities of childcare, combined with economic marginalization, may lead women to commit crimes as an alternative to hunger and poverty (Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Gomes, 2014; Granja, 2017; 2017; Matos, 2016). We cannot, therefore, dissociate these crimes from the structural social inequalities in terms of class and gender, nor from the risks associated with the social contexts in which these women live. These women are not solely performing their role as mothers and “carers”; they are also being influenced by their social position as well as their social context, such as particular neighborhoods. That being said, and as was visible for girls as well, understanding the context in which these women emerge as aggressors makes their victimization even more visible. Nonetheless, it is impossible to ignore how these women also emancipate themselves from old forms of femininity, breaking away from their settled gender role either by immigrating to change their and their family’s situation of poverty or by involving themselves in criminal practices. This was also evidenced by Matos (2016) in her study of the pathways to crime of incarcerated migrant women in Portugal.

When we consider the gender lens, and particularly the intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991; Gomes, 2018; McCall, 2005; Potter, 2015), we confirm that women face multiple vulnerabilities and obstacles due to being women, foreign and poor, with different combinations of these positions occurring throughout their trajectories until their imprisonment. However, they retain a certain ability to “break free” and challenge traditional gender roles, while still doing gender.

Therefore, perpetuated stereotypical images related to the idea that girls and women offenders are only victims of their past, their environment and their female condition are incompatible with the criminal world (Holsinger 2000) and ignore the ways in which the paths both to and in crime and within the justice system are themselves genderized (Belknap, 1996; Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Cunha, 2002; Duarte, 2012; Duarte, 2017; Duarte & Cunha, 2014; Gomes & Granja, 2015b; Gomes, 2018, 2019; Matos, 2008; Zahn, 2009). The social and physical environment of a given residential area is a key factor in understanding deviant and criminal activities and in preventing violence and crime (Sampson 2012). But the complexity of girls’ and women’s lives in contemporary societies is expressed through the coexistence of multiple ways of life and experiences of violence generally associated with different social statuses and contexts. All the participants from the three studies share a similar experience of living in socially deprived territories and show how these can be risk-driven contexts, as national and international literature has been also showing (Carvalho, 2018, Cunha, 2010; Zimmerman & Messner, 2010). Nonetheless, the way this is experienced and lived has particular configurations across different generations (Gomes et al, 2021a,b).
CONCLUSION

This article presents a comprehensive reflection focused on the place and role of gender and age in female crime and delinquency in Portugal, taking into account the voices and perspectives of those who have offended. The single stories around girls and women offenders often ignore the generational hues that can be found in female crime and delinquency. This study evidences the way in which these generational hues help to deepen and rethink femininities and feminine violence within the scope of female crime and delinquency. By uncovering a sensitive topic, the research adds a social and scientific value that goes beyond the Portuguese context, contributing to broadening the understanding of traditional and new forms of femininities in delinquency and crime across generations—childhood, youth and adulthood.

Girls’ and women’s paths both to and in crime have their own idiosyncrasies, and they reflect the way gender is being constantly reconfigured and reconstructed through time, but also in different social contexts. In fact, findings reveal a kaleidoscope of changes across generations, punctuated by an increasing involvement of younger girls in offending as a form of emancipation and being “equal” to boys. Being, becoming and doing gender are very different things for girls/women of different race, gender and social class, and these dimensions inform their actions and the various institutional and interpersonal responses to their actions.

As the result of a qualitative research study focused on specific contexts at a particular time, the findings presented in this article cannot be generalized. Femininities and risk factors vary in different social contexts (Duarte, 2012; Duarte & Cunha, 2014; Gomes & Duarte, 2018a; Wong, 2012). The use of data from interviews is always based on the portrait respondents intend to present themselves to others, which is affected by multiple individual and contextual variables. Nonetheless, this methodological option brings advantages that outweigh its limitations by providing valuable information through the voice of girls and women who portrayed themselves or are socially labeled as offenders. Thus, it makes it possible to identify hidden constructs in how they place gender in their lives and in their involvement in delinquency and crime, which would be more difficult to detect by using statistical official data.

It is not possible to understand female crime and delinquency and contribute to social and legal public policy reform at a national level if knowledge about several generations of female offenders is not considered. Findings reinforce the conclusion that policy decision-making toward more effective crime prevention policies should address the persistent impact of gender inequalities and social disadvantages in the lives of girls and women. As results show, in line with different studies conducted in Portugal (Cunha, 2002, 2019; Gomes & Duarte, 2018a; Gomes & Granja, 2015a, Duarte & Carvalho, 2017), the weight of inequalities in Portugal stemming from involvement in offending has persisted, and continues to persist, over the time.

The variety of pathways that were analyzed holds potential for further research, namely regarding the traditional dichotomy of victimization versus agency and how this dichotomy is expressed in the Portuguese context. As found in this study, girls and women can be victims—when we combine the number of social contexts with which they have negative bonds—and, simultaneously, they can be agents, when we analyze how they construct, (re)create and negotiate their space for agency through involvement in delinquency and crime. As previously mentioned, while major legal and judicial reforms have been carried out in the country in recent years, social and gender inequalities remain an unsolved problem in the Portuguese society. Further research is needed in Portugal to understand how the recent changes in law and criminal justice are tackling these social issues. This is even more relevant in pandemic times, in which a clear worsening of gender inequalities has already come about, deeply affecting all generations.
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