Expanding the Feminist Pathways Perspective beyond the United States: A Profile of Federal Women Prisoners in Argentina

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A large body of knowledge within the criminological discipline has demonstrated that women and girls have distinct social and psychological risk factors that contribute to both their initial onset, and continued engagement, in offending behavior. However, most of this research has focused on U.S. samples of women offenders. Using mixed methods, the current research investigated the offense dynamics and possible risk factors for women’s imprisonment with incarcerated women (246 survey respondents; 12 interviewees) in the Argentine federal penitentiary system. We find that there are some similarities in the characteristics of women prisoners in Argentina and the characteristics of women prisoners in the United States, but also some distinctions, primarily in the prevalence of prior victimization. In addition, our results indicate that federal women prisoners in Argentina who reported serious prior abuse were more likely to have committed crimes against persons in comparison to women without abuse histories. Such a distinction supports the ongoing research investigating women offender profiles beyond U.S. samples.

Keywords justice-involved women, Latin America, women prisoners, women’s pathways to crime

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In the past three decades, incarceration rates as a whole have increased drastically worldwide, yet the rise has disproportionately affected women in comparison to men (Walmsley, 2015). Indeed, in the United States, between 1977 and 2004 the female incarceration rate surged by 757%, a figure that almost doubled the male incarceration growth rate of 388% for the same time period (Frost, Greene, & Pranis, 2006). In the United States, the stark increase in the number of women incarcerated has been linked to the “war on drugs,” which consisted of a series of punitive policy initiatives during the 1980s and 1990s targeting the arrest and mandatory minimum sentencing for low-level drug offenses such as possession and minor trafficking (e.g., Bush-Baskette, 2013; Chesney-Lind, 1995; Harmon & Boppre, 2015). Because the majority of female offending is comprised of low-level drug crimes, scholars suggest the war on drugs is actually a war against women (Chesney-Lind, 1995), or more specifically, a war against women of color who have been disproportionately affected by such policies (Harmon & Boppre, 2015).

Globally, the number of women and girls incarcerated rose by approximately 50% from 2000 to 2014 (Walmsley, 2015). Latin America has experienced particularly disproportionate increases in female incarceration rates, likely in large part due to punitive policies targeting drug offenses (Transnational Institute, Washington Office on Latin America, 2011). On average, despite marginal increases in general population sizes (around 2%), Latin American countries have experienced a 151% increase in their female prison population over the past 15 years. Argentina is no exception in experiencing the gendered effects of mass incarceration—from 1990 to 2012 the number of female prisoners within the federal system increased 193%, whereas the male population rose 111% (Cornell Law School, Avon Global Center for Women and Justice, Defensoría General de la Nación, & University of Chicago Law School’s International Human Rights Clinic, 2013).

Meanwhile, international and domestic laws governing prisons and prison policies and practices have traditionally been designed for men (e.g., Kruttschnitt & Gartner, 2003). However, in 2010 the United Nations adopted the first international standards relating specifically to women prisoners—the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Female Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (i.e., Bangkok Rules; United Nations, 2011). The Bangkok Rules specifically call for research to be conducted on (among other things) the causes of women’s imprisonment, the characteristics of women in prison, and the impact of women’s imprisonment on children (United Nations, 2011).

Due to the significant rise in Argentina’s female prison population and international call for gender-responsive research, the current mixed-methods study focuses on the offense dynamics and possible risk factors with incarcerated women in the federal penitentiary system in Argentina. Our quantitative and qualitative samples are diverse, including a large number of foreign nationals with a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Results are contextualized within the feminist pathways perspective of offending and were originally documented in a collaborative report titled, *Women in Prison in Argentina: Causes, Conditions, and Consequences* (Cornell Law School’s Avon Global Center for Women and Justice and International Human Rights Clinic, Defensoría General de la Nación Argentina, & University of Chicago Law School’s International Human Rights Clinic, 2013). Because the pathways perspective has been largely dominated by investigations of female offending populations from the United States, this study expands the literature by exploring certain gendered risk factors of offending, such as financial deficits and victimization, beyond the United States.
CULTURAL CONTEXT: ARGENTINA AND ITS FEDERAL PENITENTIARY SYSTEM

Gender Inequality and Gender-Based Violence

Historically, women in Argentina have faced gendered inequality—including a lack of access to contraceptives and abortions (Argibay, 2010), gender-based violence (Argibay, 2010), and decreased socioeconomic equality in comparison to men (Martínez, 2014; Medeiros & Costa, 2008). In particular, Argentina has been affected by the feminization of poverty through various economic and social reforms that have disproportionately affected women (e.g., Martínez, 2014; Medeiros & Costa, 2008). In fact, research suggests that Argentinian women experience distinct economic marginalization in comparison to women relative to North America, Europe, and parts of Asia (De Oliveira, 1997). For instance, the 2001 National Argentina Census reported that women led 82% of single-headed households and the majority of these households were poor (Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales 2011). Women in Argentina are also disproportionately unemployed as compared to men—9% in comparison to 6% of men in 2011 (The World Bank, 2011).

The Global Gender Gap Report (Bekhoute, Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2013) presents cross-national differences in relative gender equality across 136 nations. Higher rankings indicate greater gender equality and lower rankings indicate increased gender inequality. For overall scores of gender equality, including measures of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, Argentina ranked 34th out of 136 nations. When considering more specific measures of gender equality, Argentina was ranked 101st for economic participation and opportunity whereas the United States was ranked 6th. Further, Argentina was ranked 42nd for educational attainment whereas the United States was ranked 1st. Thus, as compared to women in the United States, women in Argentina appear to be more economically marginalized and have lower education attainment rates on the whole.

Further, gender-based violence is a major concern in Argentina. According to the National Supreme Court of Justice of Domestic Violence (CSJN OVD), there were 657 cases of domestic violence reported in Buenos Aires in 2010—a 75% increase from the previous year (van den Boogaard, 2011). Recently, Argentinian women have begun a social movement referred to as “Ni Una Menos” (Not One Less) due to high rates of domestic violence that end in murder (Frayssinet, 2015). From January to October 2015, 223 women died as a result of domestic or gender-based violence (U.S. Department of State, 2015). Consequently, there has been a push for more protection against domestic violence. At a press conference in 2008, a report was issued entitled “Muy tarde, muy poco. Mujeres desprotegidas ante la violencia de género en Argentina Prioridades de acción para el Gobierno Nacional (Too little, Too late Unprotected Women Against Gender Violence in Argentina Priorities for Action for the National Government”; Amnistía Internacional, 2008) calling for Argentina’s government to grant more protection and stiffer sentences for gender-based violence, particularly femicide, as there have been 2,224 reported cases since 2008 (U.S. Department of State, 2015).

Although there are no comprehensive data on the magnitude and characteristics of nonfatal violence against women in Argentina (Amnistía Internacional, 2008), such political efforts highlight the importance of addressing gender-based violence in Argentina. The Supreme Court’s Office of Domestic Violence received approximately 808 cases of domestic violence...
in the city of Buenos Aires during the first 9 months of the year in 2015, approximately 66% of which involved violence against women (U.S. Department of State, 2015).

Hence, women in Argentina face distinct gendered challenges in regard to gender-based violence and economic inequality. The feminist pathways literature as a whole suggests that similar experiences play a role in women’s incarceration in the United States. Although some research has provided a general profile of women in Argentina’s federal penitentiary system, little research has thoroughly examined the connection between gender inequality nor gender-based violence and female criminality among women prisoners in Argentina.

Women Under Federal Supervision: The Servicio Penitenciario Federal

As of 2013, 69,706 people were detained in Argentine prisons and jails (Dirección Nacional de Política Criminal, 2014). According to the International Centre for Prison Studies (n.d.), Argentina’s prison population rate is 154 per 100,000 people. Each province has its own provincial penitentiary service, which oversees provincial prisons and individuals convicted by provincial courts. In 2013, the vast majority of prisoners, 53,481 (84% of all prisoners), were housed within provincial prisons (Dirección Nacional de Política Criminal, 2014). It is important to note that this study focuses solely on the federal prison system, known as the Servicio Penitenciario Federal (SPF). The SPF houses people accused and convicted of federal offenses by federal courts or common offenses by national courts located in Buenos Aires (Transnational Institute, Washington Office on Latin America, 2011).

As of April 2012, the SPF detained 9,693 prisoners in 34 federal prisons. This included approximately 872 women prisoners, who accounted for 9% of the total population of SPF prisoners (Servicio Penitenciario Federal Institutional Statistics, 2013). This percentage is slightly higher in comparison to the number female prisoners who constituted approximately 7% of the U.S. federal prison population in 2012 (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2016). The imprisonment of women into the federal system in Argentina has steadily increased since the mid-1990s. The peak of this increase was in 2007 when SPF housed 1,105 women prisoners. The large increase in women in SPF has been attributed to drug-related offenses (Martínez, 2011). Similar trends were found among U.S. federal female prisoners as well (BJS, 2016). Martinez (2011) suggests lower transfer rates of drug offenders to local jurisdictions within Argentina could have affected the jump in women federal prisoners in Argentina. Likewise, this large increase is also attributed to women’s participation in drug trafficking and changes in federal laws related to such offenses (Martinez, 2014).

Martinez (2011) and Martinez (2014) discussed the role of women in the operation of transnational networks trafficking and distribution of narcotics. Socioeconomic marginality in addition to accessibility to illegal drug markets place women in Argentina particularly at risk to engage in drug trafficking. As discussed by Martinez (2014), the high profitability of drug trafficking in comparison the low profitability of other job options available is a crucial factor in women’s decisions to engage in such drug-related offenses. However, women are typically low in the hierarchy in trafficking networks and have greater exposure to the punitive power of the State through increased visibility. Whereas men are more likely to serve as intermediaries, recruiters, or traders, women, generally, are inserted as drug couriers or circumstantially
selling small amounts. Thus, the disadvantages and discrimination observed socioeconomically also exist in the illegal drug market. Consequently, gender marks a strong distinction between the experiences of men and women involved in drug trafficking.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, in an effort to combat the use of illegal substances in the United States, Latin America was pressured by the United States to increase its punitive sentencing of drug crimes (Youngers & Rosin, 2005). Because illicit substances (e.g., cocaine) were often imported from Latin America, U.S. foreign policy was aimed toward encouraging Latin American countries to reduce supply to the United States. Argentina was no exception to this pressure and, as a result, Law No. 23.737 was passed in 1989, which enhanced sentence lengths for psychoactive substances to between 4 and 20 years considering aggravating factors. Law No. 23.737 also made possession for personal use a federal offense that can also lead to a prison sentence. However, in 2009 that part of the law was deemed unconstitutional through the Arriola ruling and is no longer used in practice although enhanced sentences for aggravating factors remained in effect (Republic of Argentina v. Arriola and others, 2009). Indeed, subsequent to the adoption of Law No. 23.737, the number of female prisoners within the Argentine federal system sharply increased from 298 prisoners in the SPF in 1990 to approximately 872 prisoners in 2012. In addition, a study conducted in 2006 found that 63% of women deprived of their liberty were in federal prisons for drug trafficking crimes (Centro de Estudios de Justicia de las Américas, 2010). Thus, such punitive drug laws have likely had a significant effect on incarceration rates.

Despite the increase in federal women prisoners in Argentina, few studies have examined the characteristics of these incarcerated women. According to a study of 100 women in Federal Unit 31, nearly 80% of participants were from low socioeconomic classes (César, 2011). Further, a 2010 study revealed that most female federal prisoners in Argentina are first-time offenders; only 18.9% of women interviewed for the study said that they had been previously detained (Centro de Estudios de Justicia de Las Américas, 2010). This profile is similar to women prisoners in the United States who come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and lack extensive histories of criminal behavior in comparison to male counterparts. However, prior official records indicate that nearly half of women housed in SPF were foreign nationals. In 2009, 52% of women in SPF were Argentinian whereas 48% were foreign. Additional records in 2012 indicated that of the 174 women in Unit 31, 101 were foreign nationals (58%), and in the Federal Complex IV, from a total of 421 women, 175 were foreign (29%). Thus, many women incarcerated in Argentina’s federal system are not native to Argentina. The percentage of foreign nationals is much higher in comparison to female federal prisoners in the United States as only 14% were not U.S. citizens in 2012 (BJS, 2016). Hence, Law No. 23.737 likely affected women who were transporting narcotics across Argentina’s borders accounting for the large number of foreign nationals.

In sum, the increase in incarceration of women in Federal prisons in Argentina is associated with harsher laws against drug crimes as it was in the United States from the early 1970s to mid-1990s. On the other hand, a little more than half of the women prisoners in Argentina are foreign nationals, which diverges from the characteristics of federal women prisoners in the United States. Economic inequality between men and women exists in Argentina as well as gender-based violence. Such factors have also been shown to affect women’s motivation to commit crimes in the United States. The following section will review the feminist pathways literature, a perspective that informs the study of women in SPF in Argentina.
FEMINIST PATHWAYS PERSPECTIVE

A large body of knowledge has emerged within the feminist criminological discipline in the last two decades demonstrating that women and girls have distinct social and psychological risk factors that contribute to both their initial and continued engagement in offending behavior (Belknap, 2015; Pollock, 2014). By conducting qualitative, cross-sectional interviews with women offenders and prisoners about their life histories, the pioneering feminist scholars began to document similar routes of offending that were commonly voiced by women from various studies and criminal justice settings (Arnold, 1990; Belknap, 2015; Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999; Chesney-Lind & Rodriguez, 1983; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Daly, 1992; Gilfus, 1992; Holsinger, 2000; Owen, 1998; Richie, 1996). This body of knowledge has become known as the “pathways perspective,” which recognizes various biological, psychological, and social realities that are unique to the female experience and synthesizes these key factors into important theoretical trajectories that describe female offender populations (Belknap, 2015). The perspective argues that women’s criminal development and recidivism are based on factors either (a) not typically seen with men, (b) typically seen with men but in even greater frequency with women, or (c) seen in relatively equal frequency but with distinct personal and social effects for women (e.g., Belknap, 2015; Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Gavazzi, Yarcheck, & Chesney-Lind, 2006; Holsinger, 2000; Holtfreter & Morash, 2003; Reisig, Holtfreter, & Morash, 2006). Consistently, both qualitative and quantitative research has demonstrated that criminally involved women have life histories plagued with physical and sexual abuse, poverty, unhealthy intimate relationships, single-parent responsibilities, mental illness (i.e., depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder), and substance abuse. The feminist pathways approach seeks to explain how women often find themselves in a cycle of victimization that leads to offending behavior.

Kathleen Daly’s (1992, 1994) pathways to crime framework was developed in response to a growing disconnect between mainstream and feminist criminology (Wattanaporn & Holtfreter, 2014). Using felony presentence investigation reports from the New Haven Superior Court’s Clerk Office (U.S. District Court) to create qualitative biographies, Daly (1992) discovered five pathways women typically take when initially engaging in crime that are distinct from the pathways taken by their male counterparts. These women offenders included: (a) street women who fled abusive household and survived on the street by engaging in drugs, prostitution, or theft to survive; (b) battered women who were involved in extreme victimization from violent partners, leading to criminal behavior related to their relationship; (c) harmed and harming women who experienced extreme sexual and physical child abuse and neglect, which led to school delinquency and ultimately chronic adult offending; (d) drug-connected women who were involved in a pattern of using and trafficking drugs usually while collaborating with intimate partners or family members; and (e) other, later termed economically motivated women (Morash & Schram, 2002), which involved women who committed crime for economic gains such as fraud, theft, and embezzlement.

On the other hand, in their study of women probationers from Missouri, Salisbury and Van Voorhis (2009) found quantitative support for three commonly qualitatively described pathways by women offenders themselves: (a) a “child abuse” pathway, which demonstrated that abuse during childhood led to mental illness and substance abuse; (b) a “relational” pathway, revealing that intimate relationships, characterized by a loss of personal power, were
associated to women probationers’ diminished self-efficacy, increased intimate partner victimization, mental illness, and substance abuse; and (c) a “social and human capital” pathway that emphasized women probationers’ lack of social support, dysfunctional intimate relationships, and low educational achievement. Each pathway increased the chances of women probationers’ failure on community supervision and further penetration of the system through incarceration.

In a more recent examination of female pathways to serious and habitual crime, Brennan, Breitenbach, Dieterich, Salisbury, and Van Voorhis (2012) identified eight reliable female offender pathways nested within four broader pathway categories using a person-centered analytical approach with a large sample of women prisoners from California (see Figure 1). Each pathway consisted of varying risk and need profiles based on women’s prior criminal history, demographic characteristics, prior trauma and abuse, parenting responsibilities, and presence of substance abuse and mental health needs.

Brennan and colleagues’ (2012) Paths 1 and 2 included women who were deemed “normal functioning,” yet drug dependent women who were less socially marginalized than women nested in other pathways and who had less involvement with the criminal justice system. Paths 3 and 4 involved “victimized and battered” women who had antisocial and abusive significant others and high rates of child and ongoing adult abuse. Paths 5 and 6 reflected serious social marginalization, educational-vocational deficits, residence in higher crime neighborhoods, stronger antisocial significant others, and more ties to organized crime or a drug network. These women also were less likely to have experienced sexual or physical abuse. Finally, Paths 7 and 8 represented aggressive, antisocial women with lifelong physical and sexual abuse, antisocial families, hostile antisocial personalities, serious mental health issues, and antisocial significant others.

A commonality in the pathways literature is the emphasis on victimization and financial difficulties that are interrelated to other risk factors such as substance abuse, self-efficacy, stable employment, and mental health. For instance, Daly (1992) found that victimization as well as

![Figure 1](FEDERAL WOMEN PRISONERS IN ARGENTINA 7)

**Figure 1** A classification of women’s pathways to serious and habitual criminal behavior. Reproduced from Brennan et al. (2012). Reprinted with permission from SAGE Publications.
connections to street and drug crimes were the most common pathways to offending. Similar to Daly’s (1992) seminal work, others have found a cycle of victimization, running away from home to escape abuse, and early involvement in the criminal justice system as major contributors to women’s further involvement in prostitution and drug use (e.g., Belknap, 2015; Chesney-Lind, 1989; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013; Pollock, 2014). Thus, socioeconomic disadvantage and victimization appear to be particularly important criminogenic risk factors among women offenders in comparison to men.

Economic Disadvantage

Although social capital theory is used to explain criminal behavior among both men and women offenders, it is a particularly important perspective toward explaining female criminality due to women’s decreased access to human capital (i.e., education, self-efficacy, and self-esteem) and social capital (i.e., social networks linked to prosocial employment and financial support). In the United States and United Kingdom, gender inequality has been linked to increases in female criminality (e.g., Box & Hale, 1983, 1984; Heimer, 2000; Heimer, Wittrock, & Unal, 2005; Hunnicutt & Broidy, 2004; Reckdenwald & Parker 2008; Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000a, 2000b; Steffensmeier & Streifel, 1992). Indeed, descriptive studies suggest that women who enter the criminal justice system in the United States experience high incidences of socioeconomic disadvantages including unemployment, low paying or part-time employment, being widowed, separated, or divorced, and a lack of educational or vocational skills (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003; Heilbrun et al 2008; Steffensmeier, 1993; Van Voorhis, Salisbury, Wright, & Bauman, 2008; Wolfe, Cullen, & Cullen, 1984). Overall, women experience unique struggles to maintain stable employment as scholars suggest that women in general experience more economic marginality in comparison to men, including lower paying jobs, less income for similar positions, and single mothers who must act as the sole providers for their children (Heimer, 2000; Messerschmidt, 1986). Consequently, women who participate in nonviolent drug and property offenses often do so to supplement their income (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013; Heimer, 2000).

In particular, maternal distress and parenting needs have been linked to women’s offending and recidivism. Nearly 80% of incarcerated women have children for whom they were the primary caregiver at the time of their incarceration, compared to 26% of incarcerated fathers (Arditti & Few, 2006; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). Arditti and Few’s (2008) qualitative study revealed that women prisoner’s maternal distress was largely characterized by health challenges, dysfunctional intimate relationships, loss related trauma, guilt and worry over children, and economic inadequacy. Thus, access to affordable childcare and social networks able to help with parenting are crucial toward successful reentry (Cobbina, 2009).

Abuse/Victimization

A higher incidence of childhood abuse and neglect is reported among incarcerated women in comparison to men (Armytage, Martyres, & Feiner, 2000; Shaw, 2000; Thomas & Pollard, 2001) and the general U.S. female population (Arnold, 1990; Belknap, 2015; Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999; Chesney-Lind & Rodriguez, 1983; Gaarder & Belknap, 2002; Gilfus, 1992,
In fact, one study found that 77–90% of incarcerated women reported life histories of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse (Messina & Grella, 2006). In particular, child sexual abuse experienced with high frequency and duration often increases the severity of trauma experienced (Chesney-Lind, 1997). Prior research has shown a relationship between childhood abuse and community recidivism. Specifically, research has shown that trauma stemming from childhood abuse leads to major mental health problems such as depression and anxiety as well as substance abuse (Anumba, DeMatteo, & Heilbrun, 2012; Bowles, DeHart, & Webb, 2012; McDaniels-Wilson & Belknap, 2008; Scott, Grella, Dennis, & Funk, 2014; Verona, Murphy, & Javdani, 2015). In turn, substance abuse and depression/anxiety are directly related to prison admissions, suggesting that childhood victimization leads, in many cases, to self-destructive cognition and behavior that contribute to offending and re-offending among female probationers (Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009).

Adult victimization has also been linked to women’s offending as it is related to other direct pathways such as substance abuse, mental health issues, and lack of self-efficacy (Belknap, 2015; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009). Gendered violence such as intimate partner violence is more commonly experienced among women in comparison to men (e.g., Rennison & Welchans, 2000). For instance, results from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (2010) indicated that more than one third of women experience rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetimes—a greater prevalence in comparison to male intimate partner violence victims. Drugs and alcohol often serve as an escape from the trauma of victimization and facilitate the commission of other crimes (Belknap, 2015). Hence, although women as a whole commit few violent offenses (e.g., murder, assault, battery) in comparison to men, those that are committed by women may stem from ongoing intimate partner victimization against an abusive partner in effort to end further abuse (Belknap, 2015).

In sum, state and federal women offenders have described various pathways to crime that often stem from childhood and ongoing victimization, trauma, substance abuse, dysfunctional relationships, lack of human or social capital, economic disadvantage, and mental health issues including depression and anxiety. Economic disadvantage and abuse/victimization are particularly important factors leading to women’s justice-involvement. Accordingly, we seek to further examine such factors in the lives of federal female prisoners in Argentina.

**THE CURRENT STUDY**

Given the evidence accumulated in support of the gendered pathways and risk factors that have emerged among women offender populations in the United States, it is important to explore their applicability among various cultural landscapes. Researchers in other nations have also employed this perspective to explain female criminality. Similar patterns of abuse, trauma, dysfunctional intimate and familial relationships, mental health issues, and drug abuse have been reported with samples of women offenders in Australia (Shand, Degenhardt, Slade, & Nelson, 2011), Canada (Shaw, 1991; Sugar & Fox, 1990), Israel (Shechory, Perry, & Addad, 2011), New Zealand, (Murdoch, Vess, & Ward, 2012), Scotland (Malloch & McIvor, 2011), and Sweden (Estrada & Nilsson, 2012). However, no studies have examined pathways theory with women in Latin America and, more specifically, Argentina. In particular, women...
in Argentina may face distinct life experiences affecting their likelihood of having risk factors directly and indirectly stemming from gendered inequality and violence. However, as many women in Argentina’s federal penitentiary system are foreign nationals with diverse ethnic backgrounds, different pathways may also emerge. Thus, our study seeks to expand the feminist pathways perspective to federal female prisoners with a variety of ethnic backgrounds housed in Argentina.

Prior studies examining female pathways into crime have utilized qualitative (Belknap, Holsinger, & Dunn, 1997; Daly, 1994), quantitative (Brennan et al., 2012; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009) and mixed methodologies (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Reisig et al., 2006; Cobbina, 2009). A mixed methods approach holds a distinct advantage in studying gendered pathways by obtaining rich, thick accounts of life experiences that lead to crime in addition to official arrest or survey data. Thus, the current study utilizes a convergent parallel mixed methods design using an emancipatory lens (i.e., a methodological perspective aimed at understanding an underrepresented or marginalized population) to explore possible criminogenic routes similar to those found among the current gendered pathways literature. We focus on financial motivation and victimization, which research suggests are particularly salient risk factors among women offenders in general, and likely women in Argentina given the specific gendered context.

Our study provides a descriptive, cross-sectional assessment of certain gendered risk factors using a self-report survey and qualitative interview with imprisoned women from the Argentine federal prison system. The qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed separately although the interpretation of the results represents the convergence of both methods. Using an emancipatory lens was necessary given the focus on incarcerated women who disclosed personal information about victimization and other life experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Surveys

The Defensoría General de la Nación (“Defensoría”), the federal Public Defender’s Office in Argentina, administered the General Prison Population Survey in each of Argentina’s four federal prisons that held women in the SPF system between October 2012 and December 2012. The Defensoría serves as ombudsman for prisons. The Defensoría is constitutionally recognized as an independent entity from the Argentine government and prison system, with functional and financial autonomy. Hence, the Defensoría is external to SPF and monitors federal institutions throughout Argentina to ensure the ethical treatment of prisoners.

Defensoria staff asked each prison to provide a list of women being detained and then used systematic random sampling to select the women from that list to be surveyed. One of every fifth woman from the list, which represented each section of the prison, was selected. Of the approximately 872 incarcerated women at the time of the survey, 246 completed the survey. At the time of the study, this accounted for approximately 28% of the total female prison population within SPF prisons (SPF Criminal Population Statistics, 2013). Women prisoners invited
to participate were informed that their participation was voluntary (i.e., they were not required
to participate and could skip any questions they did not want to answer) and that their responses
were anonymous. Identifying information (i.e., names, ID numbers) was not included on the
survey to maintain anonymity.

Six women refused to participate because they were involved in other activities at the time
and indicated it was not a good opportunity to complete the survey, representing a 98%
response rate. In deriving the percentages of survey respondents used in this report,
nonresponses to individual items were excluded. Thus, our survey statistics reflect percentages
of participants who responded to each given question.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the survey and that the results would be
anonymous. Staff members of the Defensoría administered the interviews in a semi-structured
format to participants in a private room out of the presence of SPF prison guards or officials. No
incentives were provided to prisoners to participate. The names of the women prisoners were
not written on the surveys. Instead, each survey was assigned a de-identified number.

Qualitative Interviews

In addition to the survey, the Defensoría along with researchers from Cornell Law School
conducted semi-structured interviews with a systematic random sample of federal female pris-
oners. Similar to the sampling procedures for the survey, Defensoría officials systematically
selected participants randomly (i.e., every fifth woman) from a list of current women who were
held at each prison. The selected women were then asked if they wanted to participate in the
interviews. Only one woman declined because she had a visit at the same time. The women
were informed that their participation was voluntary (i.e., they were not required to participate
and could skip any questions they did not want to answer).

Over a 1-week period, researchers interviewed 12 incarcerated women in the Federal
Penitentiary in Buenos Aires (four in Complex 3 and eight in Unit 31) in an effort to gain more
in-depth knowledge of the reasons they were incarcerated. Researchers informed each woman
interviewed about the purpose of the interview, its voluntary nature and how the information
collected would be used, and obtained informed oral consent. Interviews took place in a private
room without the presence of SPF prison staff or officials. Eight interviews were conducted in
Spanish and four were conducted in English. If participants spoke only Spanish, they utilized
bilingual interviewers or Defensoría staff provided translation from and into English for
English-speaking interviewers. During the interviews, the interviewer took verbatim notes on
his or her computer.

As the General Prison Population Survey was distributed to randomly selected women,
including those housed in the Federal Penitentiary in Buenos Aires, women could have also
been randomly selected for the interview sample as well. However, all surveys responses were
kept anonymous. Thus, it is unknown whether women who took the interview also took the
survey. Regardless, if women participated in both the survey and the interview, their survey
responses could not be linked due to anonymity.

All analyses and data management were facilitated with the use of ATLAS.ti software. The
data were analyzed through thematic analysis based on the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke
(2006). The thematic analysis was completed iteratively in two stages. First, the data was coded
inductively through open coding. This process involved repeatedly reading interview transcripts
and applying initial low-level codes to meaningful units of data (i.e., a phrase or word that represented a complete thought or idea). Initial coding involved constant comparisons between data extracts and codes (which later became themes). Next, the data were coded deductively by using the gendered pathways perspective. Specifically, initial codes were reviewed for themes related to women’s pathways to crime, such as economic hardship, relationships, and parental stress. Themes and subthemes were reviewed to ensure homogeneity within themes/sub-themes and heterogeneity between themes/sub-themes. The original interview data was revisited and read through to ensure themes and sub-themes accurately reflected interview data in context to the gendered pathways perspective.

Measures

Survey

The survey instrument included 45 open-and close-ended questions asking the women’s current and prior criminal history, demographic characteristics (e.g., age, citizenship, marital status, number of children, educational level), and current and prior abuse/victimization (physical, sexual, emotional, and intimate partner abuse). A Spanish-version of the survey was available for women who did not speak English. The survey took approximately 15 minutes and was completed with a researcher present.

Qualitative Interview

The in-depth, qualitative interviews used a semi-structured format to create narratives of incarcerated women’s experiences. The semi-structured script aimed to produce responses to questions focused around women’s personal backgrounds, economic conditions prior to incarceration, and the dynamics surrounding their current imprisonment (e.g., offense[s] committed, motivations, and prior incarcerations). Additional questions were asked regarding women’s perceptions of the conditions of their imprisonment, but these items were not the central focus of the current study. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes.

RESULTS

Survey

Table 1 displays basic demographics of the 246 women surveyed. Nearly two thirds of women were between their late 20 s to early 40 s in age, although a fairly substantial percentage were more than the age of 46 (20.5%). One hundred and fifteen women were foreign nationals, accounting for 46.7% of participants, of whom 77 women were from other South American countries. This finding is consistent with previous official records from SPF indicating that a large portion of the female federal prison population were not native to Argentina. Women who completed the survey were also characterized as having little education—the vast majority earned a secondary education or less (88.1%), and close to half (42%) completed only primary school or less.
Moreover, the vast majority of women were mothers and responsible for children upon release (79.6%). Most experienced their first childbirth at relatively young ages during mid- to late-adolescence (ages 14–20; 61.2%), and nearly three quarters were not married (i.e., single, separated, or widowed; 73.4%) and bore the responsibility of financially providing for themselves and their children (74.2%). The majority of U.S. state and federal women prisoners are mothers, as well (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

Given these characteristics, it perhaps comes as little surprise that the majority of women were incarcerated for crimes related to financial gains (see Table 2): Three quarters (76.6%) of the women were incarcerated for either drug trafficking (55.8%) or theft, burglary, or robbery (20.8%). A similar profile is found among women in the U.S. federal penitentiary system as 58% were also incarcerated for drug-trafficking charges in 2012 (BJS, 2016). A little more than 10% of women were imprisoned for murder \( (n = 23) \), and only three women (1.3%)
were in prison for assault. Notably less than 1% of federal women prisoners in the United States were incarcerated for murder as well as assault during the same year (BJS, 2016). An additional 12% of participants (n = 27) reported that they were in prison for “other” offenses, which included transportation or attempted transportation of contraband, kidnapping, sexual exploitation, reproductive slavery, or organ removal.

Any serious exploration of female offenders must also include questions regarding prior abuse given the scope and prevalence of abuse found with this population in prior research. The women prisoners in our sample demonstrated evidence of having suffered from such traumatic experiences (see Table 3). Prior to their incarceration, 36% of the women sampled indicated they had been physically abused at least once—among that 36%, the vast majority reported they had been physically abused more than once or on a regular basis (87% of the women who reported any prior physical abuse). Prior sexual abuse was experienced by 16.7% of the entire sample of women, and half of this subgroup stated this was more than a one-time event or occurred regularly. Additional victimization questions showed that 13.6% of the women had been raped prior to their imprisonment and 39% experienced violence by a spouse or family member. More than 20% of the women indicated they had suffered from either physical or sexual abuse as a child. A similar percentage of women (22%) had experienced intimate partner violence in their last relationship, characterized by physical, sexual, and/or “other” abuse (e.g., emotional, economic).

Additional Pearson chi-square analyses were conducted investigating potential distinctions between women who committed crimes for financial gains (i.e., women who committed typical drug and property crimes for financial gains, including drug trafficking, theft, robbery, and burglary) versus women who committed crimes that were less focused on financial gain and/or caused physical harm. Interestingly, we found some meaningful results, which are reported in Table 4. For instance, even though there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups on whether they were the primary household earner ($\chi^2 (1, n = 223) = .284$, 

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**TABLE 2**

Criminal Justice Characteristics of Women Prisoners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Previously incarcerated (n = 226)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes (as juvenile or adult)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current crime charge (n = 226)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug trafficking</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>55.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft/burglary/robbery</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault/battery</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If convicted, length of current sentence (n = 140)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–5 years</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–15 years</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–25 years</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life sentence</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal representation (n = 225)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private attorney</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public defender</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>82.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE 3
Prevalence of Prior Abuse/Victimization Among Women Prisoners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physically abused prior to incarceration (n = 229)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>64.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than once</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a regular basis</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually abused prior to incarceration (n = 227)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than once</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a regular basis</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raped Prior to Incarceration (n = 228)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>86.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than once</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a regular basis</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence experienced prior to incarceration by family/spouse (n = 228)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abused as a child (n = 226)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>79.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes—Physically abused</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes—Sexually abused/raped</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimate partner abuse during last relationship (n = 225)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>77.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes—Physically abused</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes—Sexually abused/raped</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes—Other (emotional, economic, etc.)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 4
Comparisons of Women Imprisoned for Offenses Related to Financial Gains or Against Persons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women who committed offenses for financial gains (n = 173)</th>
<th>Women who committed crimes against persons (n = 53)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary household earner</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>74.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible for children upon release</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>79.2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically abused prior to incarceration</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>31.2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually abused prior to incarceration</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12.1***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raped prior to incarceration</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10.9*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence experienced prior to incarceration by family/spouse</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>35.8*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abused as a child</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>18.0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimate partner abuse during last relationship</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *Pearson chi-square significant at $p < .05$; ***Pearson chi-square significant at $p = .001$. 
there were distinctions on whether they were responsible for children, χ² (1, n = 213) = 4.71, p < .05. More specifically, women who committed crimes for economic gain were more likely to be responsible for children upon their release. Nearly 80% of women who committed economically motivated crimes reported that they would have primary parental responsibilities when they returned to their communities, as compared with approximately two thirds of women who committed crimes against persons who would have such responsibilities.

Differences were also observed between groups on prior victimization. Women who committed crimes against persons were significantly more likely to have experienced nearly every type of abuse measured compared to the women who commit crimes for financial gains, especially prior sexual abuse (30.2% vs. 12.1%, respectively; χ² (1, n = 224) = 10.57, p = .001). No differences between groups were found regarding whether the women had experienced intimate partner abuse in their last relationship.

Qualitative Interviews

Initial coding revealed that nine women interviewed were foreign nationals. These women came from a variety of nations including Italy, Spain, Ecuador, and the Netherlands. This is somewhat expected as our sample is from a federal penitentiary, and is consistent with the survey results. All nine foreign national women were involved in drug trafficking. The remaining three women native to Argentina were imprisoned for drug sales, kidnapping, and armed robbery.

The thematic analysis of the 12 qualitative interviews revealed various motivations underlying women’s criminal behavior (see Table 5). The majority of women interviewed (10 out of 12) were arrested for drug-related crimes, revealing a common theme. Interestingly, seven women arrested for drug trafficking indicated they did not know that they were carrying narcotics across international borders. For example, one woman explained that she had been traveling out of the country and voluntarily agreed to carry a parcel of goods for a friend. She was later detained at the airport where the authorities discovered that the package contained liquid drugs. It is unknown if these women were truly innocent and unaware of the crimes they committed. However, if they were aware, the lack of personal responsibility for their crimes would reflect highly unusual antisocial attitudes and personality traits (e.g., thrill and risk seeking traits) that are not typically observed with the majority of women offenders (Salisbury, Boppre, & Kelly, 2016). Although there are exceptions, most women offenders have attitudes that are more self-defeating in nature reflecting low self-efficacy (Miller, 1988; Salisbury & Van Voorhis,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Characteristics of Women Prisoners Derived from Thematic Analysis (N = 12)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Currently imprisoned for a drug-related offense</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational deficits</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial difficulties</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has children</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign national</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male assailant(s) involved in crime</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married/significant other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unawareness of the crime</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2009; Salisbury et al., 2016). On the other hand, if these women were truly innocent, it would reflect additional evidence that they were targeted and used by individuals they trusted, arguably another form of victimization.

Another common theme was the involvement of male associates in the commission of their crimes. Five women described how male associates(s) had influenced them to carry drugs or participate in drug-related offenses. Six of the women interviewed were married and two others had a boyfriend. For example, Doris\(^3\) fell in love with a man she met online. After a year of online correspondence, he finally arranged for her to meet him there, but asked Doris to stop in Argentina to pick up some documents he needed and bring them to him in London. Convinced by her boyfriend, Doris put her clothes in the suitcase and left for London. When she arrived at the airport, authorities stopped her, cut open the bag and found 2.5 kilos of cocaine. However, some of the women committed crimes from the influence of male strangers or friends. For instance, one woman helped rob a store by holding a door open for male assailants who she had never met before. Notably, in both examples, the influences came from men—whether partners or strangers.

Further, three women explicitly explained that they had agreed to play a minor role in a drug crime because of the economic hardships they faced. One woman had worked at a factory, making shoes. It was only after she and her husband had both lost their jobs that they agreed to help their neighbors sell drugs. Another woman decided to become a drug mule to help her family. She stated, “My husband and I were both jobless. I had three kids and couldn’t make ends meet.”

A third woman prisoner had a 12-year-old child with dyslexia. She agreed to carry drugs from Spain to Argentina because her crime would help her provide for her son’s special needs.

Thus, a major underlying theme among women interviewed was financial motivation, primarily leading to the commission of drug-related crimes for monetary gain. Indeed, eight of the women were mothers and needed to provide financial support for dependents. Women who committed drug offenses or other economic crimes usually were involved in criminal activities on a small scale, often with the objective of providing for their families. All of the women we interviewed who were charged with drug trafficking were transporting small quantities of illegal substances across the border for which they would receive a fee of $20,000 or less. Although this amount is likely impactful in the lives of women who are often marginalized, it is a modest sum when compared with the profits amassed by individuals involved in the drug trade at higher levels (Transnational Institute, Washington Office on Latin America, 2011). One woman told us that women who act as mules typically carry only one or two kilograms of the illegal substances, for about 5,000 Euros (US $6,530) per kilogram.

Lastly, the majority of women interviewed exhibited educational deficits—eight of the 12 women had not completed secondary school. Nonetheless, four women completed secondary and even some tertiary schooling. Three of these women who exhibited educational strengths were arrested for drug trafficking and one for drug sales. Therefore, educational strengths may not necessarily decrease motivation to commit crimes for financial gains.

**DISCUSSION**

Taken together, the survey responses and qualitative interviews indicate a female prisoner population that is often economically marginalized, undereducated, and responsible for children
upon their release. These characteristics form a narrative around the women in our samples that makes engaging in criminal behavior a choice that some would argue is easier to make given their social situation and position. This is not at all unlike the narratives found from studies investigating women offenders’ life histories and pathways to crime in the United States (e.g., Bloom et al., 2003; Brennan et al., 2012; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Daly, 1992; Reisig et al., 2006; Richie, 2001; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009). Our qualitative findings help us to further understand themes behind economic crimes including financial hardship, the influence from others, or even an unawareness that the crime was taking place. Thus, the rich descriptions found in our interviews helped supplement the reasons why women in a federal penitentiary in Argentina were incarcerated. Although these results do not necessarily reduce the culpability of any woman offender, it helps us understand that interventions to reduce female criminality should focus on fostering relational and economic independence.

Nonetheless, not all women experienced significant financial struggles. Whereas our quantitative data revealed that a large number of incarcerated women in federal prison committed offenses related to financial gains, the qualitative data allowed us to explore themes among women’s lives and offense dynamics. As seen in our qualitative results, women engaged in drug trafficking were often influenced to help male associates and some unknowingly committed their crime. This supports research in the United States suggesting that the onset and continuation of criminal behavior among women is often facilitated through unhealthy relationships, particularly with men, whether as family members, intimate partners, or friends (e.g., Covington, 1998; Covington & Surrey, 1997). Such findings are characteristic of international federal women prisoners who are often caught in the drug trade with roles that place them at higher risk of detection by authorities than the roles typical of men (Martínez, 2014).

Where this study does seem to differ from prior research on women offender pathways is the reduced prevalence of serious forms of abuse and victimization found in our quantitative sample. The vast majority of women incarcerated in this study indicated that they had not suffered prior physical abuse (64.2%), sexual abuse (83.3%), rape (86.4%), violence within the family/by a spouse (61%), child abuse (79%), or intimate partner abuse during their last relationship (77.7%).

Nevertheless, when our sample was disaggregated into women who committed crimes for financial gains (i.e., drug trafficking, theft, burglary, and robbery) versus those who did not (e.g., murder, battery, and assault), we found significantly higher prevalence figures for nearly every form of abuse among the women who committed crimes against persons. Indeed, nearly half of the women who committed crimes against persons reported experiencing general prior physical abuse and prior familial/spousal physical abuse. Moreover, even though only 30% of women who committed crimes against persons reported prior sexual abuse, this was 150% higher than the women who committed crimes for financial gains (12%). Similarly, there was a 71% increase in the reporting of child abuse (physical or sexual) when considering non-economic (30.8%) versus economic (18%) crime types. Thus, our study indicated that those who did report serious abuse were often more likely to be women who had committed more serious crimes against persons (e.g., assault/battery, murder, transportation or attempted transportation of contraband, kidnapping, sexual exploitation, reproductive slavery, or organ removal) rather than typical financial-related crimes.
Gendered Pathways Typologies

Overall, our findings reveal mixed conclusions regarding the applicability of the gendered pathways typologies to federal female prisoners in Argentina. In particular, we found that the majority of women in our samples would fall under the drug-connected and the economically motivated typologies (Daly, 1992). Indeed, the majority of women sampled were imprisoned for drug trafficking followed by other property crimes such as theft, burglary, and robbery. Our quantitative analysis also showed support for the harmed and harming and battered woman typology. Specifically, women who committed more serious crimes against persons (i.e., murder, battery and assault) were more likely to have experienced prior abuse.

A few studies have further examined the presence of risk factors within each of Daly’s typologies. For instance, Morash and Schram (2002) found that economically motivated women often lacked a notable criminal history, were not violent, and did not have issues with substance abuse. Although many women under this pathway were economically marginalized, some also had full-time jobs and commit crimes to supplement their income. Further, Reisig and colleagues (2006) found that economically motivated women reported lower instances of domestic violence, suicidal thoughts, and fewer problems with substance abuse. Their criminal histories were also modest. However, a greater proportion of women in this category were not economically marginalized. Our findings support research by Reisig and colleagues (2006) who found that women who committed economically motivated crimes were less likely to have backgrounds with abuse/victimization. More research is needed to determine why women who commit crimes against persons are more likely to experience and/or report prior abuse and victimization.

On the other hand, Reisig and colleagues (2006) found that drug-connected women, often convicted for drug-related offenses including trafficking, had increased economic disadvantage in comparison to other typologies. Also, this group experienced less domestic violence and posed little risk for violent offending. Thus, financial marginalization may affect the drug-connected type more so than economically motivated women. This finding is consistent with our research because many of the women we interviewed engaged in drug trafficking to support their families’ financial needs and did not experience a history of abuse.

Taking a closer look at Brennan et al.’s (2012) typologies in relation to our two groups, it seems that the women in our sample who committed crimes for financial gain perhaps overlap with Paths 3 and 5. Both paths reflected stressed single mothers, but Path 3 reflected women who had more prior abuse compared to Path 5. On the other hand, women who committed more serious, person-involved crimes and who were less likely to be mothers, yet more likely to have suffered from abuse, perhaps would fall into Brennan and colleagues’ (2012) Paths 7 or 8—aggressive and antisocial women. Distinction between these paths is a result of more extreme mental health needs (e.g., psychosis) and a higher prevalence of previous violence among women in Path 8.

In sum, our findings generally support the ongoing research investigating the unique pathways of women offenders (Brennan, 2008; Brennan et al., 2012; Daly, 1992; D’Unger, Land, & McCall, 2002; Fergusson & Horwood, 2002; Reisig et al., 2006; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009). We found more women were financially motivated. In particular, women who committed crimes for financial gain seemed to align with the economically motivated and drug trafficking typologies discussed by Daly (1992) and others (Morash & Schram, 2002). Although our study
did not begin with the goal of investigating women offender typologies and therefore cannot cogently fit into the prior research on this topic, the fact that some important distinctions were identified between women who committed crimes for financial gain versus women who committed crimes against persons warrants further inquiry among samples beyond the United States.

As our sample was focused on federal prisoners, the types of crimes varied in comparison to past pathways research. Specifically, the types of offenses that fall under Argentinian federal rather than state law would produce a sample of women with more transnational offenses such as drug trafficking. These women may have distinct pathways in comparison women convicted of state-level crimes in the United States. Indeed, the framework that best aligned with our sample was Daly’s (1992) pathways to federal court that also examined pathways among federal female detainees.

Limitations

Nearly half of the women in our sample were not native to Argentina as a result of the federal prisoner sample. Many offenses at the federal level involve international crimes, such as drug trafficking across national borders. Therefore, this may reflect a sample selection bias that prohibits generalizing our results to all Argentinian women prisoners. Future research should be conducted at local facilities to determine major differences between native and non-native women in Argentina. Further, certain limitations exist due to the administration procedures of the survey and interviews. First, our survey distribution protocol was not trauma-informed. This could have led to under reporting because we asked broad questions related to victimization and abuse. Also, although the Defensoría is external to SPF, respondents still may have been influenced to answer a certain way due to the Defensoría’s link to the prison system. Specifically, because the survey was administered by the Defensoría and Defensoría staff acted as translators when interview participants did not speak English, social desirability may have affected women’s responses. Future research could utilize external researchers and translators to prevent this potential limitation.

Because our study admittedly did not have strong measures of risk of reoffending, substance abuse, mental health, and antisocial relationships with significant others, we are limited in our abilities to drill down further into taxonomic pathway comparisons. Nonetheless, we feel there is enough evidence to demonstrate the importance of continuing to investigate such typological frameworks in female offending, particularly beyond U.S. samples. Further, because our qualitative interviews did not ask similar questions to the survey, and respondents who were interviewed could not be linked to the survey, we could not determine the exact representativeness of the interview participants to the survey participants. Notably, as the interview did not specifically examine victimization and abuse, we were unable to compare such findings across methodologies. Future research should use a trauma-informed mixed methods approach to determine how trauma resulting from victimization and abuse may affect Argentinian women’s pathways into crime.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Overall, it is necessary to increase awareness among policy makers, prison managers, and nongovernmental organizations about this profile of female prisoners because women comprise
the fastest growing population of those incarcerated at the federal level in Argentina. In particular, we found that many women (approximately 25%) did not have a criminal record, which aligns with prior research on female federal prisoners in Argentina (Centro de Estudios de Justicia de Las Américas, 2010). Lengthy prison sentences are often unnecessary and inappropriate in circumstances where women are first-time offenders and committed financially motivated crimes. In some cases, the background of a woman offender, the nature of the offense for which she was convicted, and the conditions that led her to participate in criminal activity may merit a mitigated sentence. In fact, such mitigating factors are recognized in the Bangkok Rules (United Nations, 2011), which highlight the “generally lower risk posed by women prisoners to others” (Rule 41a; p. 19) and further state, “When sentencing women offenders, courts shall have the power to consider mitigating factors such as lack of criminal history and relative non-severity and nature of criminal conduct, in light of women’s caretaking responsibilities and typical backgrounds” (Rule 61; p. 25). Thus, our findings produce specific implications for the Argentine judicial system. In particular, we recommend that judges must be mindful of the differential experiences of women offenders. In adherence to Rules 61, 63, and 64, gendered risk and protective factors such as a lack of criminal history, socioeconomic deficiencies, and childcare should not be ignored when sentencing women.

Our study also revealed that drug trafficking constitutes the most common offense among women in federal prison in Argentina. The global war on drugs likely serves to explain, in part, the significant (and disproportionate) increase in rates of female imprisonment in Argentina. Many women indicated they were influenced by others to unknowingly transport drugs. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure the transparency of drug trafficking laws, such as Law No. 23.737. Because punitive “one-size-fits-all,” supply-reduction methods are arguably ineffective in controlling the international drug trade and lead the undermining of democracy in Latin American nations, Youngers and Rosin (2005) suggest nations create drug policies tailored to their own needs in compliance with international standards of due process and respect for human rights. In alignment with the Bangkok Rules, we stress the importance of considering women when such policies are enacted because they have likely been disproportionately affected by punitive drug laws.

Transnational networks that traffic and distribute drugs affect men and women differently. Specifically, women are highly vulnerable to engage in trafficking from an economic and social perspective as they face distinct deficits (Martínez, 2014). Consequently, addressing the needs of female federal prisoners like those in our sample must involve more general public policy shifts. In particular, Rule 60 in the Bangkok Rules suggests appropriating resources to women to devise suitable alternatives for women offenders in order to combine non-custodial measures with interventions to address the most common problems leading to women’s contact with the criminal justice system. Thus, the allocation of social supports must consider the economic difficulties faced by many women in Argentina, particularly because many of these women are often responsible for single parent households. Such stresses can be particularly salient risk factors for women’s involvement in drug trafficking networks. Consequently, the Ministry of Social Development (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social) could develop programming for women in vulnerable situations to avoid being caught in the net of drug war policies. This could consist of efforts to increase prosocial economic advancement and educational attainment to lessen the effects of gender inequality that may influence women to engage in illegal activities for financial gain.

When considering the treatment of women offenders, gender-responsive research recommends specific assessment and rehabilitative techniques to effectively account for the distinct
needs of women offenders (e.g., Bloom et al., 2003; Salisbury et al., 2016). Because women offenders in Argentina are housed in a federal system that was originally conceived for men (Martínez, 2014), we recommend that the Ministerio de Justicia y Derechos Humanos de la Argentina (Argentine Ministry of Justice and Human Rights) and the Servicio Penitenciario Federal (Federal Penitentiary Service) adopt more gender-responsive policies and practices that consider the sociological, psychological, and cultural distinctions that are unique for women offenders. Although some correctional practices for female prisoners in Argentina are considered more progressive than many other countries, including the United States (e.g., more widespread use of prison nurseries to facilitate maternal bonding and parental skill building; Cornell Law School’s Avon Global Center for Women et al., 2013), more can be done to create truly women-centered penal environments. Such changes can include trauma-informed protocol and holistic treatment programs as outlined by gender-responsive strategies prescribed for female prisons in the United States (Bloom et al., 2003). Moreover, because financial offenses were a major attribute among our federal female prisoners and women are often marginalized economically in Argentina and other nations around the globe, programs and policies targeting job readiness and educational attainment are particularly important toward successful reentry. Specifically, building financial independence will help to foster women’s self-efficacy or empowerment to use prosocial means for financial gain.

The cultural shift in the United States toward utilizing gender-responsive strategies is heavily supported and driven by the National Institute of Corrections, a division of the U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons (e.g., Holtfreter & Wattanaporn, 2014; Van Voorhis, Wright, Salisbury, & Bauman, 2010; Wattanaporn & Holtfreter, 2014). Thus, it remains up to justice policy makers and stakeholders across Argentina to build the understanding that having gender-responsive strategies creates safer communities and more humane treatment of a population that is largely silenced and ignored. Such changes often begin with the understanding that women have unique criminogenic needs compared to men, which suggests that risk/need assessment instruments measuring women’s likelihood to reoffend and treatment needs should be tailored specifically to women. Given the recognition of gendered crime and criminality, gender-responsive instruments are becoming widely adopted throughout the United States (e.g., Women’s Risk Need Assessment instruments; Salisbury, Van Voorhis, & Spiropoulos, 2009; Van Voorhis, Wright, Salisbury, & Bauman, 2010; Wright, Salisbury, & Van Voorhis, 2007; Wright, Van Voorhis, Salisbury, & Bauman, 2012) and internationally (Boppre & Salisbury, 2016). These instruments could be reconstructed to more specifically address women offenders’ risks and needs in Argentina as well.

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NOTES

1. The term “women of color” in this context refers to women who identify as Black or African American (Harmon & Boppre, 2015).
2. This value was calculated using female prison population numbers from The World Female Imprisonment List (Walmsley, 2015).
3. A pseudonym is used to protect the identity of the participant interviewee.

REFERENCES


