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Girls in conflict with law: Review of vulnerabilities

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Abstract

Introduction: Girls in conflict with the law are underrepresented within juvenile justice systems, often criminalized less for intent than for survival strategies shaped by abuse, poverty, and neglect. Despite their vulnerabilities, research in India has remained predominantly focused on boys, leaving gendered pathways into conflict with law underexplored.

Methods: This qualitative case study was conducted in two government-run Observation Homes for girls in Assam (Jalukbari and Nagaon). Using purposive sampling, five girls aged 14-18 were selected, all legally categorized as Children in Conflict with Law under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015. Data were collected through socio-demographic schedules and semi-structured interviews. Case vignettes were constructed and content analysis and thematic analysis was applied. Ethical safeguards included institutional permissions, informed consent/assent, confidentiality, and trauma-informed interviewing.

Results: Five in-depth case vignettes revealed consistent patterns of cumulative vulnerabilities. Key themes included familial disruption (broken or conflicted homes, absent parents), socio-economic deprivation (poverty, refugee/border displacement), educational disruption (dropout, irregular schooling), and psychosocial distress (loneliness, trauma, neglect). Pathways into conflict with the law included trafficking (Cases 1, 2), wrongful implication in familial disputes (Case 3), peer-influenced theft (Case 4), and substance use (Case 5). Institutional response provided custodial care but limited psychosocial rehabilitation.

Conclusion: Findings validate the hypotheses that cumulative vulnerabilities precede girls' legal involvement and that family disruption, poverty, lack of education, and abuse consistently shape their life trajectories. The study highlights the need for gender-sensitive, intersectional, and trauma-informed juvenile justice reforms that prioritize prevention, education, and reintegration over punitive measures.

Keywords: Girls in conflict with law, prioritize prevention, education, reintegration, punitive

Introduction

In the global discourse on juvenile justice, children in conflict with the law are often treated as a homogeneous category. However, gender-based disparities and the unique challenges encountered by girls in conflict with the law remain critically under-explored. Traditionally, the juvenile justice system and academic inquiry have focused largely on boys, sidelining the structural and situational vulnerabilities that lead girls into conflict with legal systems. This neglect results in inadequate legal responses, insufficient rehabilitation programs, and poor reintegration outcomes for girls (Bhattacharyya, 2019) ^[4].

Girls comprise a small but growing portion of juvenile offenders globally. According to the UNODC (2015), they constitute about 7-10% of the juvenile justice population worldwide. In India, National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2022) documents that girls make up a mere 6.4% of the total juveniles apprehended under the Indian Penal Code. However, these figures hide a disturbing reality: Girls are often criminalized for acts of survival, resistance to abuse, or societal deviance rather than deliberate criminal intent. Acts like running away from home, eloping, or engaging in sex work are frequently the result of prior victimization, not criminal predisposition (Save the Children, 2016) ^[18].

The increasing number of girls entering the juvenile justice system calls for a comprehensive grasp of the gendered pathways to criminalization. These pathways are often shaped by poverty, domestic violence, sexual abuse, child marriage, trafficking, homelessness, and patriarchal control over girls' bodies and decisions. This study aims to review the existing literature on the vulnerabilities faced by girls in conflict with the law, while also framing these experiences within relevant theoretical perspectives.

Theoretical Frameworks

Feminist Criminology

Feminist criminology challenges traditional criminological theories that have largely ignored or misrepresented women and girls. It argues that female criminality is often misunderstood, with little regard for the social contexts of gender oppression and victimization (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013) ^[6]. Feminist criminology asserts that many girls engage in “criminal” behavior as a reaction to abuse, poverty, or restricted autonomy. For instance, girls running away from abusive homes or resisting forced marriages are often criminalized for behaviors that are survival strategies. Feminist theorists emphasize the double marginalization of girls: First, by a patriarchal society and second, by a justice system rooted in moral judgments and traditional gender roles. Behaviors like sexual promiscuity or defiance are pathologized when committed by girls, whereas similar behaviors by boys are often normalized or ignored (Bhattacharyya, 2019) ^[4].

Inter-sectionality Theory

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) ^[7], intersectionality posits that gender, caste, class, ethnicity, and age intersect to establish unique structures of discrimination and vulnerability. In the Indian context, intersectionality is particularly relevant because the majority of girls in conflict with the law come from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds, including Dalit, Adivasi, and minority communities. These girls often face multiple disadvantages as children, as females, and as members of oppressed castes or tribes.

An intersectional lens reveals how structural inequalities in education, healthcare, legal access, and family support systems push certain groups of girls toward criminalization. It calls for multidimensional solutions that go beyond gender alone and address overlapping social injustices.

Ecological Model of Child Development

The ecological framework by Bronfenbrenner (1979) ^[5] provides a useful way to understand how a child's environment ranging from immediate family to broader societal structures influences their behavior. This model includes:

- Microsystems (family, peers),
- Mesosystems (interactions between family and school),
- Exosystems (parental work conditions, community resources),
- Macrosystems (cultural and legal structures).

For girls in conflict with the law, this framework highlights how family instability, abusive school environments, lack of community support, and patriarchal norms interact to increase vulnerability. It also emphasizes the need for holistic, child-centered rehabilitation policies.

Vulnerabilities of Girls in Conflict with Law

- **Abuse and Neglect:** Research consistently shows that a large number of girls in conflict with the law have histories of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, often at the hands of caregivers or family members (UNICEF, 2013) ^[22]. When state systems fail to provide protection, these girls either resort to running away or are trafficked, which in turn increases their contact with the criminal justice system.

- **Gender-Based Violence and Control:** Girls face greater societal restrictions on their movement, dress, and relationships. When they deviate from these expectations, they are often punished through familial or legal control. For instance, elopement with a partner of their choice can lead to charges of kidnapping or immoral behavior, even if the act was consensual (Singh & Dev, 2021) ^[20]. This reflects the criminalization of female autonomy.
- **Trafficking and Commercial Exploitation:** Many girls are arrested under laws like the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, not as perpetrators but as victims of trafficking. Police often arrest them during brothel raids, ignoring the coercive circumstances. Once labeled as offenders, these girls are institutionalized and rarely receive proper rehabilitation or psychological support.
- **Poverty and Homelessness:** Girls from low-income or homeless backgrounds are more likely to be picked up for petty theft, loitering, or begging activities often driven by survival needs. Due to lack of parental care, these girls become easy targets for exploitation and criminalization, particularly in urban areas.
- **Mental Health and Substance Use:** Exposure to trauma, combined with neglect, leads to high rates of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse among girls in the juvenile justice system. However, mental health remains a neglected area, with few observation homes offering psychological support (Save the Children, 2016) ^[18].

Significance of the Study

This review is significant for several reasons:-

- **Addressing a Knowledge Gap:** Existing research on juvenile justice in India is heavily male-centric. By focusing on girls, this study brings visibility to an invisible population, whose specific needs are overlooked in legal, policy, and rehabilitative frameworks.
- **Gender-Sensitive Reforms:** Understanding the unique vulnerabilities of girls can help shape more inclusive juvenile justice policies. Current structures often replicate patriarchal norms that led to the girls' criminalization in the first place. A gender-sensitive approach can promote restorative justice, trauma-informed care, and non-custodial alternatives.
- **Intersectional Justice:** By applying an intersectional lens, the study encourages policymakers to go beyond gender and consider how caste, class, religion, and region compound girls' marginalization. This is critical for achieving equity in juvenile justice systems.
- **Informing Community-Based Interventions:** The findings can guide NGOs, child protection agencies, and local authorities in developing preventive and rehabilitative programs focused on vulnerable girls. It can also support the training of law enforcement officials to handle girl offenders with empathy and legal awareness.
- **Improving Data and Documentation:** One major challenge in this domain is the lack of disaggregated and comprehensive data. This study advocates for better research tools, documentation practices, and gender-segregated statistics, which are essential for effective policy-making.

Girls in conflict with the law represent one of the most marginalized and misunderstood groups within the juvenile justice system. Their pathway to criminalization is often not marked by intent or malice, but by systemic failures, abuse, and social exclusion. Using feminist, intersectional, and ecological theoretical frameworks, this review uncovers the multi-layered vulnerabilities that push girls into contact with the law and examines the inadequacies of current legal and rehabilitative responses.

There is an urgent need to re-imagine juvenile justice for girls not as a punitive tool but as a platform for protection, healing, and empowerment. Ensuring that girls receive fair treatment, adequate support, and dignified reintegration into society is not only a legal obligation but a moral imperative. This study contributes to that goal by shedding light on the unique experiences and needs of girls in conflict with the law in India and beyond.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design, which is particularly suitable for exploring complex, context-specific issues such as the experiences and vulnerabilities of girls in conflict with the law. Case study research allows for an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon within its real-life context. It facilitates detailed exploration of social, emotional, and institutional dimensions of girls' pathways into the juvenile justice system.

The objectives of the study are:

- To examine the socio-economic, familial, and psychological vulnerabilities of girls who come into conflict with the law.
- To explore the lived experiences of girls during their interaction with the juvenile justice system.
- To identify common themes and patterns in the life trajectories of girls in conflict with the law.

Hypothesis

- Girls in conflict with the law commonly experience cumulative socio-economic, familial, and psychological vulnerabilities prior to their legal involvement.
- Patterns such as family disruption, abuse, lack of education, and poverty consistently emerge as key themes in the life trajectories of girls in conflict with the law.

Research design

The research design employed is qualitative case study design:-

Sample

Purposive sampling technique is used for the present study. Data from 6 girls is collected from different districts of Assam as there was limited number of girls available.

Sampling Criteria:

- Girls aged between 14 and 18 years.
- Legally categorized as Children in Conflict with Law (CCL) under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015.
- Currently residing in an Observation Home at the time of data collection.
- Willing to participate in the study with assent, and with consent.
- Able to articulate and reflect on their experiences during one-on-one interviews.

Procedure

According to State Child Protection Society, Social Welfare Department, Government of Assam there are 2 government run child care institutions/ children observation homes across different districts of Assam for girls, namely Jalukbari and Nagaon. Data is collected from the institutions after taking permission of the government authorities on the basis of the availability around the time period of data collection. Socio-demographic data sheet consisting of age and education of girls in conflict with law and controls, family type and parental education and a semi-structured interview schedule is used for data collection.

Ethical considerations

- Institutional permissions were obtained from the Department of Social Welfare and the heads of the selected juvenile homes.
- Informed consent was obtained from each girl after clearly explaining the purpose, nature, and voluntary nature of the study.
- Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, with pseudonyms used in all documentation and reporting.
- Special care was taken to adopt trauma-informed, gender-sensitive, and non-judgmental interviewing techniques to ensure psychological safety.

Case Vignettes

Case 1: FK a 15 year old girl from Myanmar, hailing from a broken family was residing in Bangladesh refugee camp. Her 4 siblings and parents lives on their own in the refugee camp. She was kidnapped by three elderly men from the refugee camp in truck load of cattle and was traded to group of men in India. FK did not have any idea where she is being taken as she was drugged and was in a semi-conscious state all the way through the journey. She could not even say for how many days she was in that state and what has been going on with her throughout. When she came to her senses she found out that she has been sold and she is in Jammu Kashmir. She struggled for 7 months to flee from that place. After many failed attempts somehow she managed to run out and board a train. She reached Guwahati, Assam where she was taken under custody by Police. On hearing her story she was handed over to Observation Home for Girls, Jalukbari, State Child Protection Society, Government of Assam under Foreigners Act where she is living a safe life waiting to reunite with her family.

Case 2: BBF a 14 year old girl from Bangladesh, Assam border. She belongs to a family of 9 members, six siblings and parents. She is the 5th born and school dropout. BBF was lured by her middle aged admirer. He offered to take her for picnic to Assam. BBF agreed for the outing thinking that it will be fun. Journey till the crossing the border and reaching Guwahati was pleasant. BBF suspected that something was wrong when her admirer told her that they have to take a train and go to his cousin's place in Hojai as some emergency has come up. Upon reaching Hojai it was already night, BBF was blindfolded, her hands & legs were tied and she was shut in a dark room. She was kept in that room for several days with a guard to give her food and take her to toilet. During that period of time BBF struggled to escape many times but failed. One day while going to toilet in the evening she managed to run after hitting the guard. She was helped by an old man she met on the way. On

hearing her story the old man rescued her to the nearest police station. Police handed over BBF to Observation Home for Girls, Nagaon, State Child Protection Society, Govt of Assam. Officials of Observation Home for Girls, Nagaon contacted her family members in Bangladesh and are trying to process her return legally.

Case 3: Seventeen-year-old R, a resident of a small rural village in Upper Assam, grew up in a joint family consisting of her parents, two younger brothers, her paternal uncle, aunt, and grandparents. Her father, school dropout, worked as a daily wage labourer in agriculture, while her mother, who had never attended school, managed the household chores. The family was poor, often struggling to make ends meet, and depended heavily on seasonal farm work. R had studied up to Class IX but dropped out when her family could no longer afford the expenses of her schooling. After leaving school, she helped her mother with household tasks and sometimes assisted her father in the fields. At home, she was exposed to constant quarrels between her parents and her uncle's family, mostly over land disputes. The aunt, in particular, was known to taunt R's mother and blame her for "breaking the unity" of the family. One evening when R's aunt was found unconscious in the kitchen area of their shared house. She had sustained a fatal head injury. Relatives immediately suspected foul play, and in the heated atmosphere, fingers were pointed at R and her mother. Some family members alleged that R and her mother had struck her aunt with a wooden pestle following an argument. Others insisted that the girl had been seen entering the kitchen just before the aunt's collapse. Within hours, the police were called, and an FIR was registered under naming R and her mother as the accused. As R was under 18 years of age, she was produced before the Juvenile Justice Board (JJB) within 24 hours of her apprehension. Police handed over R to Observation Home for Girls, Nagaon, State Child Protection Society, Govt of Assam.

Case 4: Sixteen-year-old MB, hailing from a semi-urban area of Jorhat district in Assam, grew up in a nuclear family with her mother and two younger siblings. Her father had migrated to another state for work but rarely sent money home, leaving the family in a state of financial insecurity. Her mother, with only a primary-level education, worked as a domestic helper to support the children. Despite her

efforts, the family often struggled to afford basic necessities. MB was an average student and had studied until Class VIII but eventually dropped out due to the family's financial pressures. She began spending much of her time in the local market area with a group of slightly older girls, some of whom had already been involved in petty theft. Over time, peer influence and the lure of small amounts of easy money drew her into their activities. One afternoon, MB was apprehended by shopkeepers after being caught attempting to steal an expensive mobile phone from a local electronic shop. The shop owner reported the case to the police, and she was taken into custody. As a minor, she was presented before the Juvenile Justice Board (JJB) within 24 hours. Police handed over MB to Observation Home for Girls, Nagaon, State Child Protection Society, Govt of Assam.

Case 5: Fifteen-year-old KS belonged to a small town of Assam. Her parents had separated when she was ten, following years of quarrels and domestic violence. After the separation, KS lived with her mother in a rented one-room house, while her father remarried and had little contact with her. The family's social ties weakened, and KS often felt abandoned by her extended relatives, who sided with her father. Her mother worked as a saleswoman in a garment shop. She left home early in the morning and returned late at night, leaving KS without consistent supervision. KS was studied in a government school, with less interest in studies. Lonely and craving attention, KS started spending more time outside the home. She befriended a group of older adolescents in her neighbourhood, many of whom were already experimenting with alcohol and inhalants. At first, she resisted but later began using inhalants and cannabis as a way to "forget her problems." Over time, she developed dependency and would occasionally steal small amounts of money from her mother to buy substances. One evening, KS and her friends were caught by the police while using inhalants in an abandoned building. She was taken into custody and presented before the Juvenile Justice Board (JJB) the next day. The case was registered under the NDPS Act for substance use. Police handed over KS to Observation Home for Girls, Jalukbari, State Child Protection Society, Govt. of Assam.

Results

Table 1: Comparative table of findings

Case	Family type	Education	Key Vulnerability	Pathway to Conflict with Law
Case 1-FK, 15 Years	Broken, Displaced	No regular schooling	Refugee Status, family separation	Kidnapped & trafficked
Case 2-BBF, 14 Years	Large, poor, disrupted	School dropout	Poverty Large Family, manipulation	Lured-abduction/trafficking
Case 3-R, 17 Years	Joint family (conflict)	Dropped after class IX	Poverty, family hostility	Accused in aunt's murder
Case 4-MB, 16 Years	Nuclear, father absent	Dropped after class VII	Poverty, peer influence	Petty theft
Case 5-KS, 15 Years	Broken, single mother	Govt. School irregular	Loneliness, neglect, peer influence	Substance abuse

Content Analysis of Case Vignettes

Key Categories Identified

From the cases, the following recurring themes emerge:

Family Background and Structure

- Broken families / separation (Case 1, Case 2 and Case 5).
- Joint family conflict (Case 3).
- Nuclear family with absent/migrant father (Case 4).

Parental Education and Occupation

- Most parents with low or no education (Cases 3, 4, 5).
- Mothers often homemakers, low-paid workers, or absent due to work (Cases 4, 5).
- Fathers absent, remarried, or minimally contributing financially (Cases 4, 5).

Socio-Economic Vulnerabilities

- Poverty and economic insecurity present in nearly all cases.

- Refugee/undocumented status (Case 1, Case 2) adds heightened vulnerability.
- Struggles to meet basic needs (Cases 3, 4, 5).

Educational Disruption

School dropout is a consistent theme:

- **Case 1:** Never properly schooled due to displacement.
- **Case 2:** School dropout.
- **Case 3:** Dropped after Class IX due to poverty.
- **Case 4:** Dropped after Class VIII due to financial strain.
- **Case 5:** Irregular attendance and low interest.

Pathways into Conflict with Law

- **Trafficking / cross-border vulnerability:** Case 1 (kidnapped and sold), Case 2 (lured by admirer → abduction).
- **Familial conflict & framing:** Case 3 (accused in aunt's death amidst land disputes).
- **Peer influence & economic temptation:** Case 4 (petty theft through market peer group).
- **Substance abuse & neglect:** Case 5 (inhalants and cannabis with peers).

Psychological and Emotional Factors

- Loneliness and craving for belonging (Case 5).
- Fear, trauma, and helplessness (Cases 1, 2).
- Pressure from family conflict and suspicion (Case 3).
- Desire to escape poverty and monotony (Case 4).

Connections with Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Girls in conflict with the law commonly experience cumulative socio-economic, familial, and psychological vulnerabilities prior to their legal involvement.

Supported

- All cases show layered vulnerabilities (poverty + family disruption + low education + emotional neglect).
- Even in cases of trafficking (1 & 2), vulnerabilities stemmed from broken/disrupted family life and lack of protection.

Hypothesis 2: Patterns such as family disruption, abuse, lack of education, and poverty consistently emerge as key themes in the life trajectories of girls in conflict with the law.

Supported

- **Family disruption:** Present in Cases 1, 2, 5 (broken families), and Case 3 (joint family conflict).
- **Abuse/Neglect:** Trafficking (Cases 1, 2), domestic neglect (Case 5).
- **Lack of education:** All cases involve dropout/educational disruption.
- **Poverty:** Strong in Cases 3, 4, 5; refugee displacement adds another dimension in Cases 1 and 2.

Thematic Analysis of Case Vignettes

Theme 1: Familial Disruption and Broken Homes

Subtheme 1.1: Parental Separation and Neglect

- KS's parents separated after years of domestic violence

→ father remarried, weak social support → lack of supervision, substance abuse (Case 5).

- MB's father migrated and rarely supported the family financially → mother overburdened, children left vulnerable (Case 4).

Subtheme 1.2: Family Conflicts and Accusations

R's joint family disputes over land → aunt's hostility toward R's mother → R accused of aunt's death in hostile environment (Case 3).

Subtheme 1.3: Large or Broken Families in Refugee/Border Contexts

- FK from Myanmar refugee camp → broken family with little protection → kidnapped and trafficked (Case 1).
- BBF from a large family of 9 → lack of parental attention and supervision → vulnerable to manipulation by admirer (Case 2).

Theme 2: Socio-Economic Deprivation

Subtheme 2.1: Poverty and Insecure Livelihoods

- R's family depended on seasonal farm labour; couldn't sustain education (Case 3).
- MB's mother worked as domestic helper; family often lacked basic necessities (Case 4).
- KS's mother worked long hours as a saleswoman; unstable income and absence at home (Case 5).

Subtheme 2.2: Refugee/Border Vulnerability

- FK's displacement and statelessness as a refugee increased her exposure to trafficking (Case 1).
- BBF's marginal family living on the Bangladesh-Assam border heightened risks of cross-border exploitation (Case 2).

Theme 3: Educational Disruption

Subtheme 3.1: School Dropouts due to Poverty

- R dropped out after Class IX as family couldn't afford her schooling (Case 3).
- MB studied until Class VIII, left school due to economic hardship (Case 4).
- BBF dropped out of school before being lured by her admirer (Case 2).

Subtheme 3.2: Poor Engagement and Disinterest

KS irregular at school, showed little interest in studies due to emotional neglect (Case 5).

Subtheme 3.3: no access to education in refugee context

FK, displaced and uprooted, had no meaningful access to education (Case 1).

Theme 4: Pathways into Conflict with Law

Subtheme 4.1: Trafficking and Abduction

- FK kidnapped from refugee camp, trafficked to J&K, escaped to Assam (Case 1).
- BBF lured by admirer, abducted, blindfolded, locked, and escaped (Case 2).

Subtheme 4.2: Familial Conflict leading to Criminal Accusation

R implicated in her aunt's suspicious death amidst family feuds (Case 3).

Subtheme 4.3: Peer Influence and Deviant Behaviour

- MB influenced by peer group engaged in theft → caught stealing mobile phone (Case 4).
- KS influenced by peers experimenting with substances → caught using inhalants and cannabis (Case 5).

Theme 5: Psychological and Emotional Vulnerabilities**Subtheme 5.1: Loneliness and Craving for Belonging**

KS felt abandoned by father and neglected by extended family → sought peer acceptance through substance use (Case 5).

Subtheme 5.2: Trauma, Fear, and Helplessness

- FK drugged, trafficked, and kept semi-conscious → long struggle to flee (Case 1).
- BBF blindfolded, tied, and locked in a dark room → repeated failed escape attempts (Case 2).

Subtheme 5.3: Stress from Family Conflicts

- R exposed to constant parental and extended family quarrels → accused in violent outcome (Case 3).

Summary of Thematic Analysis**The five cases clearly validate the hypotheses:-**

- **Cumulative vulnerabilities:** Poverty, broken families, lack of education, and psychological neglect preceded the girls' conflict with law.
- **Recurring patterns:** Included family disruption (Cases 1, 2, 3, 5), educational breakdown (all cases), poverty (Cases 3, 4, 5), and abuse/neglect (Cases 1, 2, 5).
- **Pathways into legal involvement:** Varied trafficking (1, 2), wrongful implication (3), theft (4), substance abuse (5) but all were rooted in structural vulnerabilities.
- **Institutional response:** Was protective in nature, with Observation Homes serving as the immediate safe custody and rehabilitation measure.

Discussion

The content analysis and thematic analysis of the five case vignettes provides compelling evidence that girls in conflict with the law in Assam are shaped by layered socio-economic, familial, and psychological vulnerabilities, which strongly support both hypotheses of the study.

Familial Disruption and Broken Homes

One of the most consistent themes observed was the presence of family breakdown, conflict, or absence of parental figures. Three of the five cases (Cases 1, 2, and 5) highlighted the impact of broken families, with girls experiencing parental separation, neglect, or remarriage of one parent. In Case 3, the existence of joint family disputes over land rights further created an environment of hostility that culminated in the girl being accused of her aunt's murder. Family dysfunction has long been established as a predictor of juvenile delinquency, as broken or conflict-ridden households limit supervision and emotional security (Shader, 2004; Agnew, 2006) ^[19, 2]. In particular, the absence of fathers either due to migration (Case 4) or remarriage (Case 5) contributed to neglect, lack of supervision, and weakened family bonds, aligning with prior research that emphasizes the protective role of intact families in preventing delinquency (Murray & Farrington, 2010) ^[15].

Socio-Economic Deprivation

Nearly all cases revealed the pervasiveness of poverty and economic insecurity. Families in Cases 3, 4, and 5 struggled to meet basic needs, while refugee or border contexts in Cases 1 and 2 heightened the risks of exploitation and trafficking. This finding is consistent with existing literature showing that economic deprivation restricts opportunities, disrupts education, and increases susceptibility to deviant influences (Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1994) ^[11, 17]. The precarious livelihoods of mothers working as domestic helpers, vendors, or low-paid laborers further reflected gendered patterns of economic vulnerability, with limited ability to provide stable supervision. Prior studies in South Asia also confirm that refugee or undocumented status exacerbates girls' vulnerability to trafficking and cross-border crime (Kapur, 2015) ^[12].

Educational Disruption

Educational discontinuity was a universal theme across cases. From Case 1, where displacement denied any formal schooling, to Case 5, where irregular attendance was due to emotional neglect, all girls had disengaged from formal education by mid-adolescence. These findings echo previous research demonstrating that low educational attainment and early dropout are strong risk factors for delinquency (Henry *et al.*, 2012; Lochner, 2020) ^[10, 14]. Education not only provides skills but also acts as a protective institution, offering structure, prosocial peers, and monitoring. In the absence of such engagement, the girls were more vulnerable to deviant peers and risky behaviors.

Pathways into Conflict with Law

The pathways into legal conflict varied across the cases but were rooted in broader vulnerabilities. Trafficking and abduction were central to Cases 1 and 2, where refugee status and large family neglect created conditions for manipulation and exploitation. In Case 3, familial disputes directly led to the girl's implication in a murder, underscoring how intra-family conflicts can extend into legal entanglements. Peer influence was notable in Cases 4 and 5, where economic temptations led to theft and peer acceptance needs drove substance use. This resonates with theories of differential association and social learning, where delinquent peers provide both opportunity and reinforcement for deviance (Akers, 2009) ^[3].

Psychological and Emotional Factors

Psychological vulnerability emerged as a cross-cutting theme. Loneliness, trauma, and helplessness were evident in Cases 1, 2, and 5. Girls trafficked across borders endured extreme trauma, with prolonged experiences of fear and abuse, while girls from disrupted families sought belonging in peer groups, often leading to risky behaviors. These findings align with studies that link emotional neglect, trauma, and lack of psychosocial support to delinquent behavior (Kerig & Becker, 2010; DeHart *et al.*, 2014) ^[13, 8]. Importantly, these vulnerabilities were cumulative: poverty, family breakdown, and neglect interacted to exacerbate the girls' psychological distress, consistent with life-course theories of crime (Sampson & Laub, 1994) ^[17].

Institutional Response

While all five girls entered the juvenile justice system through diverse pathways, the institutional response was

primarily protective, with Observation Homes serving as spaces of custodial care and rehabilitation. This reflects the child rights-based framework of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, which prioritizes rehabilitation over punishment. However, the systemic lack of mental health support, vocational training, and family reintegration services remains a concern, as highlighted in other studies of juvenile institutions in South Asia (Sintakala, 2018) ^[21].

Validation of Hypotheses

The analysis strongly validates both hypotheses. First, cumulative vulnerabilities across economic, familial, educational, and psychological domains were evident in all cases, preceding the girls' involvement with the law. Second, recurring themes of family disruption, poverty, neglect, and educational dropout consistently shaped their life trajectories, echoing both national and international evidence on female juvenile delinquency.

Conclusion

In summary, the case vignettes reflect a convergence of structural disadvantages, familial disruptions, and emotional neglect that propel girls into conflict with the law. These findings highlight the urgent need for multi-layered interventions: strengthening families, ensuring access to education, addressing poverty, and providing psychosocial support to at-risk girls. Without such preventive measures, structural vulnerabilities will continue to reproduce cycles of victimization and legal entanglement among marginalized girls in Assam.

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