**Introduction**

Women comprise about 51% of the world’s population, yet the percentage of incarcerated women varies worldwide, ranging from 1% to 10% of the entire prison population (International Center for Prison Studies, 2016). Women are arrested, convicted, and incarcerated less than men. Women in prison also have lower recidivism rates (the tendency of a convicted offender to reoffend) (Davidson & Chesney-Lind, 2009; Geraghty & Woodhams, 2015). Yet, in recent years there female delinquency including serious offenses like murder or sexual abuse, has increased (Ministry of Justice UK, 2018; USSC, 2020).

Israel has only one criminal incarceration facility for women and girls, which is designated as a maximum-security prison, despite housing inmates of different risk levels (Einat & Chen, 2012). The prison can house 271 women: currently 46% of them under arrest or awaiting trial, and 54% already convicted. Ethnically, the prison population is 75% Jewish, 17% percent Arab Israeli nationals, and 14% Christian or other religions (Yacimovich-Cohen, 2017). In comparison, the United States has three different kinds of incarceration facilities: local jails, state prisons and federal prisons. Although the United States has the highest percentage of women in prison out of their total prisoner population (12.3% women in prison in the United States, compared to 1.3% women in prison in Israel ) (USSC, 2020), there are some sociodemographic similarities between incarcerated female populations in both countries. Women in U.S state prisons (Carson, 2020; Kajstura, 2019) and women in prison in Israel (Yacimovich-Cohen, 2017) are more likely than men to have been convicted for drug or property offenses, yet violent offenses (e.g. murder, sexual assault or robbery) remain the main offenses for both genders. In addition, women in prison are older than their male counterparts, and have shorter sentences than men. Women imprisoned in U.S. state prisons have a much larger percentage of ethnic minorities (African American and Hispanic) than those in Israel, where most women in prison are white and Jewish.

Numerous theorists have long tried to explain female delinquency, with two significant tendencies emerging from their theories. The first is the use of gender stereotypes to explain female criminality and explanations emphasizing similarities between women’s and men’s criminal behavior (Adler & Adler, 1975; Giordano & Cernkovich, 1997; Moffitt et al., 2001; Simon & Landis, 1991). The second approach focuses on women in prison’s unique characteristics, highlighting the link between women’s delinquent behavior and victimization, which can refer to physical or sexual abuse (Campbell, 1993; Katz, 2000; Trauffer, & Widom, 2017) or social and economic discrimination (Bailey, 2013; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2016).

An analysis of traditional and contemporary approaches to accounts of women’s criminal behavior indicates that most of them portray women in prison as having no alternative or having been passively led to commit crimes. The question arises as to whether, in light of the changes in women's criminal lifestyle characteristics and the increase in economic offenses they commit and for which they are convicted, the reason for their criminal behavior can be explained solely by presenting them as victims of circumstances. The purpose of this study is to examine whether patterns of choices and taking responsibility for criminal lifestyle decisions made by Israeli women in prison is reflected in their life stories.

**Theoretical Background**

Research on female criminal lifestyle or pathways has grown substantially in the last few decades (Baskin & Somers, 1993; Daly, 1992; Flood-Page et al., 2000; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2019; Simpson et al., 2016). The pathways perspective highlights how victimization, perceived inequalities, and experiences influence women’s involvement in a criminal lifestyle. These studies have generally addressed positivistic elements, such as the age when woman begin and end their criminal careers and their history of victimization. Research on pathways to crime divides risk factors for a criminal lifestyle into two main groups: adolescent-onset women in prison who begin their criminal lives as minors, and late-onset women in prison who begin their criminal careers as adults (Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Simpson et al., 2016). It has been found that, in general, females tend to begin their criminal careers at a later age than do men (Baskin & Somers, 1993; Flood-Page et al., 2000).) Numerous studies have found that risk factors for female delinquency are childhood physical and sexual abuse and the use of addictive substances (DeHart, 2018; Katz, 2000; Papalia, 2018; Peterson et al., 2019; Simpson et al., 2008, 2016). Females with adolescent-onset criminal behavior also have more extensive offending histories, higher drug involvement (use/dealing), and a greater variety of types of offenses they commit. In contrast, women with late-onset criminal behavior generally did not have records of adolescent delinquency and did not suffer from addiction, neglect, or childhood victimization (Kratzer & Hodgins, 1999; Simpson et al., 2016). These women usually began their delinquent lifestyle at a relatively older age, and were convicted primarily of economic or violent offenses (Daly, 1994; Kruttschnitt & Carbone-Lopez, 2006; Shechory et al. 2011) These findings indicate that a history of victimization is not necessarily the main factor accounting for all female criminal acts.

The last two decades of studies on female pathways focus on two approaches that seek to explain what leads women to embark upon a criminal lifestyle in order to find the basis for correction intervention. The first is the gender-specific approach (Caudy et al., 2018; Holtfreter, 2015; Vos et al., 2013), also known as a gender-informed (Blanchette & Brown, 2006; Blanchette & Taylor, 2009) or gender-responsive (Bloom et al., 2003) approach. It assumes that there are “gendered” pathways through which the unique life experiences of women are linked to criminal behavior. Factors like mental health, drug abuse, and histories of victimization have been found to be connected mainly to female criminal behavior (Brennan et al., 2012; De-Hart et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2016).

Studies show that this assumption fails to explain criminal behavior among women with no history of abuse or injury (Daly, 1992; Shechory et al. 2011). For example, Daly (1992) found five different pathways that women in prison had followed, with most of them either having suffered a history of abuse as children or adults, or having engaged in drug use and addiction. In contrast, one of the groups, which Daly termed “other women,” had no history of abuse and were neither violent nor addicted to drugs or alcohol, with most holding normative full-time jobs. Having committed mainly economic offenses, their delinquency patterns resembled those of men. Shechory et al. (2011) found similar results, with, with some women in prison showing high levels of self-control and low levels of aggression and not having suffered from sexual or physical abuse. Hence, gender specific factors alone cannot explain female criminal acts and cannot be an exclusive basis for rehabilitation programs.

The second approach to explain female criminal lifestyle is known as a gender-neutral approach. It assumes that the same criminogenic needs lead men and women to adopt a delinquent lifestyle, and targeting them in therapy can dramatically reduce the likelihood of recidivism (Andrews et al., 1990; Andrews et al., 2006; Blanchette & Brown, 2006; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010). According to this approach, the major risk factors for criminal behavior for both genders includes antisocial attitudes and beliefs, a history of antisocial behaviors, a history of family criminality, as well as neglect and abuse, and low levels of educational or financial achievement (Andrew et al., 2006). However, critics noted the lack of proper evidence of this criminogenic need validity in crime-involved females (Blanchette & Brown, 2006; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013), while some research finds different criminogenic needs for juvenile delinquent boys and girls (Chan, 2019) and for males and females who committed white collar offenses (Goulette, 2020). Others have claimed that it remains unclear what factors need to be targeted in interventions for some crimes committed by women (Mackay et al., 2018).

Another gender-neutral factor as a measure of successful rehabilitation for men and women with criminal behavior emphasizes the personal responsibility (Beech & Fordham, 1997; Fortune et al., 2014). According to this approach, a sense of personal responsibility increases motivation to maintain normative behavior. Yet theories and research on rational explanations and personal or mental gains in delinquent behavior have focused mainly on men (Akers, 2017; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Loughran et al., 2011). One of the few studies examining rational choice theory (RCT) across gender groups was that of Neissl et al. (2019). They found that while of RCT can consistently, though not identically, explain crime committed by men and women, for both genders, the perceptions of the rewards of crime appeared more compelling than the threat of sanctions. Viewing delinquent behavior among women in terms of rational choice is consistent with the findings of some of the studies published in recent years (Ajzenstadt, 2009; Kruttschnitt & Carbone-Lopez, 2006; Shechory et al., 2011). It was found that the causes of violence were not only childhood or marital abuse, but a wide variety of factors that included a desire for money and respect (Kruttschnitt & Carbone-Lopez, 2006) or power-seeking (Gueta & Chen, 2016). These studies indicate a new trend in explaining gender-neutral motives and causes of delinquent behavior among women, with an emphasis on their being proactive and rational in their decision to break the law.

The literature review reveals that there is a lack of research of the rational choice of a criminal life path among women or of responsibility taking for their criminal actions as a basis for their rehabilitation. Moreover, none of the approaches provide an answer to criminal lifestyles among women who did not suffer from abuse or neglect and their criminal acts are not classic matches of risk factors for women in prison. Thus, the main purpose of the present study is to investigate patterns of decision-making and responsibility-taking vs. the compulsion process selection of a criminal lifestyle among women in prison as reflected in their life stories. Understanding this pattern may contribute to the development of more appropriate treatment programs for women in prison, based not only on their criminal patterns and sense of victimization, but also on their subjective perceptions regarding their degree of personal responsibility for their criminal lifestyles and the offenses for which they were convicted.

**Method**

**Participants**

The current research is based on a sample of 30 Israeli women in prison who had been imprisoned for the first time, had been sentenced for various offenses between the years 2007 to 2009 and agreed to participant in the study. The study was conducted in the Neve Tirtza women’s prison, the only prison for women in Israel. The decision to use first-time women in prison was based on the assumption, supported by studies, that the number of times someone has been incarcerated affects how the individual perceives and presents him or herself, as being in prison leads an individual to become part of a subculture in which norms, values​​, and delinquent attitudes are adopted (Thomas, 1977; Walters, 2003). Therefore, to minimize the effect of imprisonment as much as possible, only first-time women in prison were included in the study. Data collection was performed until saturation was reached (Saunders et al., 2018).

Although a small sample can appear to be a disadvantage in quantitative studies, it has been shown to provide a significant advantage in qualitative studies. Crouch and McKenzie (2006) discussed the logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research and argued that using such small samples was the optimal way to conduct analytic, inductive and exploratory studies. This claim has been supported by other researchers (Guest et al., 2006; Marshall et al., 2013). A research review of recent qualitative studies conducted in prisons shows that, in numerous studies, the number of participants is less than 30 (e.g., Duarte, & Carvalho, 2017; Hau & Azad, 2020; Maghsoudi et al., 2018).

Table 1 shows the participants’ social-demographic characteristics and criminal backgrounds.

[Table 1 about here]

In Table 1, we see that most of the participants were adults, with an average age of 42. Most had a minimum education of 12 years, with 43% of participants holding a college degree. The average sentence length was approximately four years. Three women in prison were sentenced to life in prison, and another was sentenced to 25 years in prison. According to Israel Prison Service System data, the offenses committed by the participants could be classified into four categories: violent crimes, including murder, manslaughter or attempted murder; domestic violence, including negligent and violence against a minor or murder of a spouse; drug offenses and economic offenses, such as fraud, embezzlement, theft, and robbery. Table 1 shows that this research’s sample research resembled Israel’s general women in prisons’ population.

[Table 2 about here]

In the present study, over 45% of the participants did not mention experiencing any type of abuse. The information about abuse came from participants’ self-reports when relating their life stories. Asked to speak freely about their lives during the interview sessions, they voluntarily reported very personal details from their life stories, discussing their difficulties with family members and spouses. The interviews sought to let the women speak freely and to allow them to explain why they had broken the law in their own words. Most of who did not report abuse grew up in established families, were well-educated, had developed professional careers, and were sentenced for economic offenses. These women in prison were characterized by less victimization history, and their criminal acts were mostly the result of a desire to help others or an effort to obtain personal gain (Gottschalk, 2020; Mostert, 2018).

**Data Collection**

1. *Life Story Approach*: A narrative interview is an open, in-depth interview during which the participant’s story is revealed. When an individual describes the course of his or her life, a great deal of information emerges, revealing the deep meaning of that person’s life (Bertaux & Kolhi, 1984). The participants were asked to write their life stories and to participate in in-depth interview to tell their life stories. Using this method, the researcher’s influence on the process is minimal, as the participants’ own words create perceptions, without any interference from the researcher during the participant’s spontaneous narration. The instruction to the participants in the present study was, “Please write your life story in any mother tongue or any language that is convenient for you.” After completing this written portion of the study, participants underwent an in-depth interview, during which they were instructed to: “Please tell your life story.”
2. *Semi-structured questions*: After finishing an in-depth interview, the participants were asked to complete three semi-structured questions. These questions referred to the offenses for which the women had been convicted and their levels of responsibility acceptance according to three-time frames (Author, et al., 20xx):
3. Present tense reference to the: “I committed the offense because…”
4. Retrospective vision of the offense: “Factors that led me to break the law…”
5. Hypothetical statement: “I could have prevented the offense…”

**Procedure**

After obtaining the permits to conduct the study from the Israeli Prison Service (IPS), the researchers had the IPS officials make a request to the women in prisons to participate in the research and to obtain their consent. Out of 50 women in prison who originally agreed to participate in the study, only 38 actually attended the meeting with the researchers. During the course of the study, four participants asked to withdraw their consent either due to their unwillingness to expose themselves to a stranger, or due to a fear of missing their work hours in the prison. Another four life stories were not analyzed because it was not the women’s first imprisonment.

After obtaining written permission, the first stage of the study was conducted, and each woman in prison was asked to write her life story without any specific guidelines. The writing lasted approximately half an hour to one hour and was written in the participants’ mother tongue, either Hebrew (26 participants), Russian (3 participants), or English (1 participant). The written life stories were translated into English by one of the researchers, whose mother tongue is Russian but who has a high level of English (as does the second researcher).

The second stage included the narrative interview, in which the participants were asked: “Please tell us your life story.” At the end of the interview, they were asked to complete the three semi-structured questions discussed above. Finally, each participant was asked to answer a personal information questionnaire. Each interview lasted between two and three hours.

Using a mixed method of qualitative analysis based on grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998), parts of the text were encoded into categories using a comparison of data and identification of common meanings and patterns. Themes were identified by the researchers using holistic coding and focused (categorical) coding (Saldaňa, 2012), until they were confident that saturation had been achieved. This article discusses two of the main themes that arose: first, the participants’ reasons for initially engaging in crime, and second, the specific offense for which they had been convicted. Descriptive statistics were also used as a quantitative research tool in order to help describe the data more vividly. To maintain authenticity, the participants’ quotes from their life stories are related faithfully, including any grammatical or linguistic mistakes.

**Results**

Research on pathways to crime indicates three main themes than are connected to female criminal life: (a) the age at which the women first engaged in crime, (b) the type of offense, and (c) whether there is a history of abuse. The life story analysis in the present study discusses the women’s decision-making processes about embarking on a delinquent life course in light of these three themes and in light of their acknowledgement of responsibility for their choices.

**Acknowledgement of Responsibility and Beginning Age of Delinquency**

Life story reports ranged from “taking absolute responsibility for choosing the current course of life” to “not taking responsibility for the delinquent act.” Analyzing participants’ explanations for beginning a criminal life style identified three categories based on the degree of responsibility they took for their acts: personal choice, i.e., recognizing full or partial responsibility for their course of action; blaming the situation on others, i.e., taking partial or minimal personal responsibility; and not guilty/not an offender, i.e., denying any responsibility.

In this context, a distinction was found between the ten interviewees who began their delinquent life course as minors and the twenty interviewees who first broke the law as adults, shedding light on the question of whether the age of the woman in prison’s behavior can be linked to the extent of their taking responsibility for the offense.

[Table 3 about here]

[Table 4 about here]

Tables 3 and 4 show the differences between women in prison whose criminal lifestyle began as minors and women in prison who committed their first offense, usually the one for which they were currently imprisoned, as adults. The majority of the first group (*N* =10) had a history of physical or sexual abuse as children and had been convicted of violent or drug offenses, usually involving selling and/or distributing. The second group (*N* = 20) had a very low history of abuse. Most had either suffered from domestic abuse by their spouse or had experienced no abuse at all. They had been convicted of various offenses, including domestic violence and economic offenses. Any drug offenses in this group usually involved smuggling charges.

[Table 5 about here]

A chi-square test was performed to examine the relation between the age of the first offense and the woman’s acknowledgement of responsibility. The relationship between these variables was significant, *X2*(2, *N*=30) = 8.143, p= .017. As Table 5 shows, women in prison who began their criminal lifestyle before the age of 18 tended to blame their life situation or others for their acts, while those who began their criminal life at age 18 and older tended to describe their criminal acts as personal choices. Yet there are patterns of personal choice in both groups.

*Personal choice*. This refers to engaging in a delinquent lifestyle and participating in criminal acts as a personal choice. Almost half of the participants reported having rationally chosen to break the law, thereby taking full responsibility for their behavior. The main reason given for their offense was wanting to make a lot of money quickly. For example, L., who was convicted of drug trafficking and began her criminal lifestyle as a minor, stated:

I began trading [selling drugs] before I started using it. My first delivery at the age of 16 was from Colombia. I saw that I was able to deliver it, and it “spoke to me” [I liked it]...I did it. I know I did. It’s a check I should repay. I’m not innocent at all. Thank goodness I’m only accused of this and not other stuff.

The participant described herself as proactive and solely responsible for her actions. She chose to break the law for emotional satisfaction and career development. She began her delinquent behavior out of curiosity and for personal pleasure, and continued selling drugs to support herself. Similar explanations characterized women in prison who started their delinquent lifestyles as minors. In contrast, participants who broke the law as adults were convicted primarily of financial offenses, claiming that they had chosen to break the law to obtain material objects and wealth, and, mainly, to create an image of themselves as successful and strong women in the eyes of the others. They had built impressive careers, but despite their economic wealth, the fear of losing everything was great, and they felt unsatisfied with their lives.

For example, N., 41, a married mother of three, began her criminal life as an adult. Convicted of fraud and theft and sentenced to five years in prison, she described her life:

My salary is good, but you start thinking about what else do you need in life?...I was afraid to look at myself and say I did something wrong...Most comfortable in these situations is denial. But, I wasn’t concerned with what I was doing, thinking less about [my or somebody else's] feeling; my thinking was about doing and not a result … I had an ordinary life, but I’m a very active person - organizing parties, [in] school, [in] kindergarten too. Challenging [myself] with lots of interests and still bored.

The participant claimed that her desire for economic prosperity and higher social status was stronger and more compelling than recognizing that her actions were prohibited and that she was breaking the law. She also pointed out the feeling of boredom that arose after breaking the law for the first time and not getting caught. It is interesting to note that four out of the six interviewees in this category independently stopped their criminal acts, on their own initiative, and confessed their actions before getting caught by the police. Stopping their criminal behavior is also an example of their rational thinking and/or the control over their actions.

Blaming their life situation and/or other people. This reaction involves imposing responsibility for the delinquent life course on the situation or on other people. Nine participants (29%) reported beginning a delinquent life course due to the situation to which they had been subjected, or that they had been forced to break the law unwillingly, or began their delinquent lifestyle as a result of the influence of others. This category was more common among those who began their criminal life delinquents as minors (66.7%) than among adult delinquents (33.3%).

The participants who began their criminal life as minors claimed that as children, they grew up with a great sense of deprivation, primarily emotional. Their parents could not give them the warmth, love, support, and encouragement they craved. These participants described growing up in a state of great loneliness. They had all lived in slums, and at very young ages had met up with “bad” company: men who used alcohol or drugs. Quickly, they found themselves using drugs or alcohol as well. Most of them were sexually abused at an early age, and most of them took the time to open up and talk about these events. They claimed that they had broken the law under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and in most of the cases, the incident ended in murder. For example, J., convicted to four years for second-degree murder, explained:

I don’t drink in general, but when I drink, I can’t stop. I chose vodka because it was available... Maybe it doesn’t hurt me because he [the victim] was a criminal. Still, I know I’m not God, and I had no right to take his life even though he was rubbish.

On the one hand, J. claimed that she allowed herself to release all her inhibitions and act on her urges only under the influence of alcohol. Nonetheless, she did acknowledge her responsibility for committing the crime and admitted that she alone was responsible for taking a human life.

Among “adult delinquents,” the main claim was that their lives with a violent partner had led them to choose a delinquent life course. All of them had been convicted of violent crimes. Their stories abound with harsh descriptions of abuse by their spouses or partners and the difficulty of leaving because of the children. They also recounted numerous failed attempts to get help from outside parties, such as the police and social agencies. They shifted most of their responsibly to their spouses or partners by describing themselves as normal, claiming that their behavior at the time of the offense was the result of blind reliance on decisions of their spouse or partner’, or the result of acting under the influence of their spouse or partner. For example, M., who had been convicted of child abuse and child endangerment, described her faith in her partner, who had claimed to be a very religious and holy man:

It sounds absurd. You believe in that person. But the correction [of evil] doesn’t work that way. I couldn’t move. I prayed that this correction [using violence on the children as punishment] would be over. I thought I’d be with this man until 120 [years-old]. I couldn’t because I was paralyzed.

M. was raised in a very religious lifestyle where there was no doubting the righteousness of the rabbi. Her partner was, in her eyes, a great religious man. As a result, she had to obey him and not ask questions, even if she felt his behavior was wrong. However, even interviewees who did not grow up in the religious world reported trusting their spouses or partners and underestimated their own responsibility, tending to blame their partner for breaking the law. B., convicted of fraud and sentenced for four years in prison, related:

I was dumb for believing him [her son-in-law]. Foolishly, he dealt with my invoices, and used his accountant, and so I was sent here to Neve Tirtza prison. Poor advice, poor financial management, loss of invoices and all that fell on me because the business is mine and in my name.

The participants in this category admitted that they were responsible for their actions, but this acknowledgement of responsibility was partial. In their opinion, most of the responsibility for the criminal acts was attributable to external factors and other people.

Not guilty/Not offender. Participants in this category did not perceive themselves as delinquents, regardless of whether they took responsibility for the commission of the offense. Eight of the interviewees (27%) described themselves as innocent, normative, and mistakenly imprisoned; all of them had committed their first offense as adults. For example, H., convicted of infanticide explained:

My child died at birth. I wanted this boy. I love children. I’ve never done anything wrong. Suddenly, I got a letter to come to court. I was accused of child murder and threats. I did not threaten anybody. And that’s it. I was sentenced to seven years.

Like other participants in this category, H. described the feeling of surprise when she realized that she was on trial and was even more surprised when convicted and sentenced to time in prison. Other participants admitted that although an offense had been committed, they insisted that it had been committed not by them, but by another person, who had incriminated them. Most of their life stories focused on the positive and good things they had done in their lives. The only bad thing that they considered having happened to them was becoming involved with the person who had incriminated them. They described themselves as “not guilty,” and felt a sense of injustice and helplessness that had accompanied them since the trial, because of their inability to prove their innocence. They took no responsibility for their criminal acts.

In summary, the analysis of these life stories shows that most of the participants (74%) claimed partial or full responsibility for their illegitimate actions. Most of them (64%) started their delinquent lifestyle as adults, 18 years and older. Among participants who had begun a criminal lifestyle at a younger age, the reasons for delinquency were usually expressed in terms of external causes, including bad company or an unfortunate life situation.

**Acknowledgement of Responsibility and Type of Offense**

Analyzing data from the Israel Prison Service System, the offenses committed by the participants could be classified into four categories: drug offenses (*N* =11) such as sale, supply or possession; violent crimes (*N* =10), including first- and second-degree murder, or attempted murder; domestic violence (*N*=4), including negligent and violent behavior against a minor or murder of a spouse; and economic offenses (*N* = 5), such as fraud, embezzlement, theft, and robbery. Table 4 shows three categories of responsibility-taking expressed by the women, as detailed in the previous section: personal choice (full responsibility); blaming the situation or others (partial responsibility); and not guilty/not an offender (no responsibility).

[Table 6 about here]

*Drug Offenders.* More than 50% of the participants convicted of drug offenses claimed full responsibility for their criminal acts and their criminal lifestyle. For example, A., a mother of two girls, had a normal life, after a divorce, her economic situation deteriorated. She decided to transfer full custody of her daughters to her ex-husband while trying to improve her finances. She was convicted of drug smuggling and sentenced to five years’ imprisonment:

I connected with the wrong people and got a very tempting offer of a very large sum of money. This money could “fix” my life and that of my girls. I tried to take my girls back [get custody]. I had no money, so I found myself in very dark places… I was fascinated by the offer, wanting my own house and my girls. And I also said [to myself] what is smuggling? I look like a good girl [so I won't be caught].

A. reported that she had engaged in criminal activity twice. The first time she didn’t get paid, and after the second time, she got caught by the police, for which she expressed gratitude. Otherwise, she claimed that she could have gone to “very dark places.”

*Violent Offenders.* The answers of the participants in this category were inconsistent and were split into the three types of responsibility-taking. Yet we found that the main response of the participants was blaming either the situation or others for their criminal lifestyles. Most of them had committed offenses under the influence of drugs or alcohol. For example, K. was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to 12 years in prison. She admitted being sexually active at very young age. At the age 14, she was sexually abused several times by boys her age. She didn’t describe it as abuse, because she claimed that she consented to these acts. But afterwards, she realized what she had done and felt very ashamed. She never told this to her parents. She began drinking alcohol to relieve the pain she felt and became increasingly violent towards others. At the age of 25, while working at a club as a security guard, she was drinking when one of the customers assaulted her. She retaliated, hitting him forcefully with a bottle, which resulted in his death. She told us: “People that say, the fact that you are convicted of killing is because of the influence of alcohol; I agree with that. Alcohol opened the door for me to take out my anger.”

Throughout the interview, she blamed alcohol for her violent actions, emphasizing that the circumstances would have been different if she hadn’t been drinking.

*Economic Offenders.* Similar to drug offenders, the majority (60%) of these participants took full responsibility for their criminal acts. Y. lived a very normal life and worked as a lawyer. Her father got into financial trouble and she decided to help him by borrowing money from a loan shark at a very high interest rate. When she couldn’t repay the debt, she began stealing money from her clients’ accounts. She was sentenced to three years for fraud:

I don’t blame the loan shark for this, only myself…. I was convicted…

In three cases of my clients - I was guilty. To most customers, I returned

the money through my ex-husband.

This participant not only took responsibility for her acts, but also felt regret. Some of the other economic convicts also tried to compensate their victims.

*Domestic Violence.* As with the other categories of crime, the majority of those convicted of domestic violence acknowledged full or partial personal responsibility. For example, S. was convicted for 25 years for conspiracy to commit murder after being accused of planning to kill her husband with her lover. At her trial, S. described the abuses she had suffered for years at the hands of her late husband and claimed she didn’t know about her lover’s plans for killing her husband. But ultimately, she was convicted of murder:

I was convicted because I was stupid. I was the first suspect because I complained to the police about abuse. So, they [police] thought I had the biggest motive to kill my husband. And then they went to the motive of a mystery lover. And I started lying - I said no. Lying to the end even when J. [the lover] was arrested and took full responsibility for the murder. I knew that J. was meeting with my husband and told him that it would end very bad. But he [J.] went anyway. But I concealed it and ended up getting a life sentence as well.

S. cited several reasons for her conviction, blaming her acts on the situation in which she had gotten caught up; lying to the police; and the police determination of her culpability. However, she did take responsibility, acknowledging that her actions might have caused her lover to try to hurt her husband.

The main finding in this analysis is that across all the offenses, we could observe participants who assumed full or partial responsibility for their criminal acts. The majority of those acknowledging full responsibility were economic and drug offenders.

**Acknowledgement of Responsibility and History of Abuse in Three Time Frames**

In our previous analysis, we addressed the participants’ criminal lifestyles as reflected in their life story interviews. Here, we present a descriptive analysis using Author et al.’s (20xx) semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews refer to the offenses that the participants had been convicted of, as presented in three time frames: present tense: “I committed the offense because…”; retrospective perspective of the offense: “Factors that led me to break the law…”; hypothetical state: “I could have prevented the offense…” The range of the answers can be classified into four categories:

*It depends on me*. I could have prevented the criminal act – taking full responsibility;

*It depends on others.* I could have prevented the criminal act if someone had helped me or done something for me first – taking partial responsibility;

*Deflecting blame.* Somebody else did the crime—denying self-responsibility;

*I am innocent.* The offense did not take place at all—denying all responsibility.

[Table 7 about here]

The main finding that emerged was that only those without a history of abuse were consistent in acknowledging their own responsibility across the three different times frames (present, retrospective, and hypothetical). On the other hand, women in prison without a history of abuse changed their perception of responsibility across the three times frames.

Acknowledging responsibility occurred more frequently when the women responded to the question that was phrased hypothetically than when the offense was referred to in the present or retrospective tense. However, the participants who reported suffering from any kind of abuse did not change their acknowledgement about responsibility for the offense regardless of the tense in which the question was framed. More than half of the participants acknowledged full responsibility, conceding that they bore most of the responsibility for their actions.

There were three subcategories of responses reflecting an attitude of “It depends on me”: avoidance of a particular behavior, different thinking, and different behavior. “Avoidance of a particular behavior” usually referred to avoiding the use of psychoactive substances (e,g, “I shouldn’t have used drugs,”or avoiding breaking the law: “If I hadn’t sold drugs”).

“Different thinking” consisted of participants discussing their expected consequences for committing the offense. This included statements inferring that the offense could have been prevented if, for example, “I had self-understanding … and I could realize [what] the results [would be]”; or “If after the first trial I realized what it means”; or “If I was built differently mentally, I might have married someone else.”

“Different behavior” included responses that mentioned contacting relevant help agencies, such as, “If I had called the police and told them it was happening, or that a person was injured...” The participants argued that the results could have been altered and the offense could have even been prevented if somebody had helped them at some point in life. The responses of these participants can be divided into two subtypes:

1. Demand for active support of another party: For example, “If they helped me...if the police or social workers had helped me”; or “If I had family support, financial support, if I had steady employment, I wouldn’t go through the life I had”; or “If they had sent me to rehab, if they gave me some chances.”
2. Demand for listening: Expecting that if someone had listened to them, it would have helped change their perceptions and would have helped them to find other solutions. For example: “If just I talked, explained the difficulty and stopped seeking to use drugs to give me confidence. But there was no one I could talk to. At the age of 12, I contacted a social worker. I begged them to be taken to boarding school, and nothing happened”; or, “If I had anyone to talk to...If I had the opportunity to talk to a professional, talk about control issues that my [bad] behavior could have been prevented.”

“It depends on others” referred to blaming the victim for not stopping the offenses for been committed and “Deflecting the blame” referred to the victim as the main culprit for the offense. For example, “I committed the offense to keep her silent and not talk about what happened” or “if he [the victim] hadn’t let me drive, if he had insisted that he drive instead.” Denying self-responsibility appeared only in women in prison with a history of abuse.

The “I am innocent situation” is the only one in which no responsibility is taken for the commission of the offense, and it involves the greatest perception of not having committed a crime: “I did not commit an offense. I am only accused of being present and nothing more.”

In summary, there is a tendency to take responsibility for the offense, with most women in prison in this study referring to their delinquency in terms of partial or full self-responsibility.

**Discussion**

This study aimed to examine if there patterns of choices by examining responsibility-taking of criminal lifestyles made by Israeli women in prison as reflected in their life stories. Our main finding was that over half of the participants claimed full or partial self-responsibility for engaging in a criminal lifestyle or committing the offense. This figure was consistent even when dividing the participants by their age of first offense or by their history of abuse.

Similar to previous studies on gender-specific risk factors of female criminal behavior (Chen & Gueta, 2016; Simpson et al., 2016; Trauffer, & Widom, 2017), half of the participants reported physical or sexual abuse in childhood or as adults. A gender-neutral approach claims that the same criminogenic needs, such as a history of abuse, drive women and men (Blanchette & Brown, 2006; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010). Their childhood histories shows that, like women, many men with criminal behavior have suffered from physical, sexual, and mental abuse (see Burton et al., 1994; Dargis et al., 2016; Miley et al., 2020; van der Put, 2015). Some studies (e.g., Chen & Gueta, 2016; Martin et al., 2008) have found that female women in prison have higher rates of emotional and sexual abuse than do male offenders. Others indicate that women in prison who reported abuse or maltreatment in childhood had a higher risk of later delinquency, similar to that of male offenders, or had no significant differences compared to males (see Ryan & Testa, 2005; Watts & Iratzoqui, 2019). These studies suggest that specific types of abuse, rather than gender, shape specific delinquent behaviors. Thus, the gender-specific approach alone can't explain a delinquent lifestyle or behavior among all women.

Contrary to these two approaches, some participants with a history of victimization did not emphasize abuse as their main reason for breaking the law, describing their actions as rational choices based on financial considerations. Hence, although gender-specific and gender-natural approaches do reflect women’s victim history and may explain delinquent behavior among these women, this study’s findings indicate that this claim cannot be generalized to all women who have suffered abuse. In addition, these two approaches don’t adequately explain that in this study, half the women had not suffered from abuse or any kind of maltreatment in the past. Most had been convicted of economic offenses and claimed to have chosen the delinquent behavior out of financial considerations.

It seems that both gender-specific and gender-neutral approaches emphasize the history of victimization as the main factor or as a criminogenic need leading women to criminal lifestyles. But these approaches do not address the differential effects of maltreatment on the women, nor difference in responsibility-taking in different time frames, or between women with or without histories of abuse. We found that the degree of personal responsibility-taking for criminal behavior increased in a hypothetical state, but remained low in the retrospective or present tense. In contrast, among women who had suffered from abuse, the degree of responsibility remain consistent in all three time frames.

We posit that the lack of change in responsibility-taking can be attributed to women in intervention programs being perceived, according to both approaches, as passive, having had a criminal lifestyle forced on them. Therefore, there is no reference to the issue of choice or personal responsibility. Considering that many participants claimed personal responsibility for their criminal actions despite abuse experiences in the past or having not experienced abuse, there is evidence that this can be a factor in explaining female criminal behavior that can be considered both gender specific and gender neutral.

An integrated approach can help construct diverse treatment programs for women that consider both gender and non-gender factors. For example, some researchers have found that girls with a history of drug abuse or of trauma enjoyed positive therapy outcomes after participating in gender-sensitive intervention (Day et al., 2015; Saxena et al., 2014). In contrast, girls without these risk factors didn't benefit from the same intervention and had a higher risk of recidivism than did delinquent girls who had suffered abuse (Day et al., 2015). These findings indicate that such interventions may be more beneficial for those with a history of abuse, drug use, or depression who perceive their victimization history as a major factor for their behavior, than for women with no such history or women who perceive their criminal acts as rational choices. The latter might benefit from targeted therapy, taking responsibility as a basis for change and growth. At the same time, taking responsibility as a factor for explaining female criminal acts as rational choices and its effects on treatment outcomes has not yet been tested, while gender-specific treatment outcomes have been found to be inconsistent.

The results of our research support the need for an integrated approach explaining women’s criminal paths, including both gender-specific factors, like history of abuse or the age of the first offense, as well as gender-neutral factors, such as decision-making in terms of rational choice and personal responsibility. Moreover, we assume that taking responsibility for a criminal act should be one of the factors in intervention programs, regardless of whether or not there is a history of victimization. This assumption is based on clinical and empirical studies of delinquent men focusing on their recognition of their delinquent acts, and on their assumption of personal responsibility as a prerequisite for undergoing a therapeutic process and as a measure of treatment success (Beech & Fordham, 1997; Wright & Schneider, 2017). According to this approach, a sense of personal responsibility increases the motivation to maintain normative behavior. Conversely, when an individual’s self-perception is that of victimhood, their sense of personal accountability is diminished. This fosters deviant behavior by reinforcing the person’s sense of inability to change the course of his or her life.

It should be emphasized that we do not ignore that women in prison have experienced different types of victimizations, but, rather, we focus on a more integrative approach, highlighting the importance of treating female delinquency equitably, not stereotypically. We believe that understanding that female criminality and criminal lifestyles are not driven by either gender-specific or gender-neutral factors but the integration of both, and that accepting responsibility as a basis for their therapy can enable these women, some for the first time, to reclaim a sense of control over their lives. Moreover, being treated as victims can lead women in prison to explain their criminal behavior accordingly and to refuse to accept responsibility for their actions, although such acknowledgement is critical to the rehabilitation processes.

**Limitations**

This study has a several limitations. The first relates to the mixed-methods approach, which included qualitative analysis and descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics analysis used here indicates patterns but are not sufficient to provide significant qualitative insights. The pattern identified in the study should be further investigated using different quantitative analytic approaches in order to uncover statistically significant relationships and outcomes.

One of the main inclusion criteria in this study was that participants needed to be in prison for the first time, which significantly limited the number of participants. Moreover, women represent a minority of the inmate population, and the one Israeli prison for women holds only 230 women in prison (both arrested and convicted), further reducing the number of potential participants. As a result, for each type of offense, there is only a small representation.

Second, the conclusions of this study are based on the reports of the interviewees, and not on an actual examination of their behavior, thus limiting the generalization of the findings. However, qualitative research does not focus on numerical representativity or generalization, but rather on deepening the understanding of a problem, or the subjective point of view of the participants. It enables researchers to obtain insights into what it feels like to be another person and understand the world as others experience it. The findings in this study highlight a decision-making process and patterns of responsibility in criminal lifestyle among women, as explained in their own words. We recommend continuing to examine these patterns in further research that focusses on different types of offenses.