**Introduction**

Women are arrested, convicted or incarcerated less than men. Although women comprise about 51% of the world's population, the percentage of incarcerated women varies worldwide, fluctuating between 1% and 10% of the entire prison population (International Center for Prison Studies, 2016). Lower rates of violence and recidivism (i.e. the tendency of a convicted offender to reoffend) are also evident in female offenders (Davidson & Chesney-Lind, 2009; Geraghty & Woodhams, 2015; Walk & Berman, 2017). Yet in recent years there has been an increase in female delinquency including serious offenses like murder or sexual abuse (Ministry of Justice UK, 2018; United States Sentencing Commission, 2020).

For years, numerous theorists have tried to explain female delinquency. Examining the theories of women’s delinquency reveals two significant tendencies. The first is the use of gender stereotypes to explain female criminality (Block, 1984; Giordano & Cernkovich, 1997) and explanations emphasizing that women’s criminal behavior has characteristics similar to that of men (Adler & Adler, 1975; Moffitt et al., 2001; Simon & Landis, 1991). The second approach focuses on the unique characteristics of female offenders, highlighting the relationship between a woman’s victimization and her delinquent behavior. Victimization can refer to physical or sexual abuse (Campbell, 1993; Katz, 2000; Trauffer, & Widom, 2017) or social and economic discrimination (Bailey, 2013; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2016; Reckdenwald, & Parker, 2008; Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000).

An analysis of traditional and contemporary approaches to accounts of women’s criminal behavior indicates that most of them portray women offenders as having no alternative or to having been passively led to commit crimes. Treating delinquent women as victims can cause them to adopt corresponding terminology to explain their criminal behavior and to refuse to accept responsibility for their actions, although such acknowledgement is critical to the rehabilitation processes. The purpose of the present study is to examine patterns of choices in criminal lifestyles made by Israeli female offenders as reflected in their life stories.

**Theoretical Background**

Delinquency can sometimes serve as a career or lifestyle. Super (1980) defined a career as the integration and development of roles during a person’s life. According to this definition, career development signifies a long-term process in which an individual’s abilities and interests combine with environmental constraints. Coombs (1996) argued that if a career is indeed an individual’s life, then if a person’s primary occupation is crime, it can be considered a career. Similarly, Edelstein (2016) pointed out that a career is an individual’s principal occupation, which can be normative or delinquent; it involves a degree of professionalization, and the learning of techniques, norms, and rules, as well as justifications and excuses associated with this occupation. Shover (1996) opposed the concept of a “criminal career,” preferring to use the term “delinquent lifestyle,” wherein offenders, especially those committing offenses against property, were accustomed to a particular lifestyle for which they had to commit offenses in order to maintain it. Walters (1990) also uses the term “lifestyle” instead of “career,” arguing that “delinquent lifestyle” is part of the delinquent career definition. He ignored offenders who acted due to pathologies and emphasized the rational choice the individual makes when entering the world of crime. Consequently, rather than confronting any sense of inferiority or fear of failure, a person with a delinquent lifestyle usually avoids obligations and does not take responsibility for their actions.

Scholarship around female criminal lifestyle or pathways has grown substantially in the last few decades (Baskin & Somers, 1993; Daly, 1992; Denno, 1994; Flood-Page et al., 2000; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2019; Simpson et al., 2016). Pathways perspective highlights how victimization, inequalities form a person's standpoint and experiences influence their involvement in the criminal lifestyle. These studies have generally addressed positivistic elements, such as the ages when woman begin and end their criminal careers and the history of victimization.

Daly’s (1992) research was one of the first attempts to construct a typology of delinquent women by pointing out patterns and conditions that lead to violence and delinquency among women. She found five different pathways among female offenders, with most of them having a history of abuse as children or as adults, drug use and addiction. Their delinquency varied between violence and drug-related crimes. In contrast, one of the groups, called “other women” had no history of abuse, were neither violent nor addicted to drugs or alcohol. Most had legitimate full-time jobs. Their delinquency was characterized mainly by economic offenses, and their delinquent patterns were similar to those of men.

Shechory et al. (2011) made a distinction between three groups of female prisoners according to the offense type for which they were convicted: violence offenders, drug offenders or fraud offenders; and the age at which they embarked on a criminal path. One of the groups was characterized as “chronic” delinquents. These women suffered from childhood abuse, began their delinquent behavior at an early age, and tended to use drugs and had been convicted of drug offenses. In contrast, another group of women embarked upon their delinquent lifestyles at an older age, were relatively better educated, with only a few of them having suffered sexual or physical abuse in childhood, and with most of them having committed economic offenses. This latter group of women were found to have high levels of self-control and low levels of aggression. The third group of women offenders convicted of violent offenses was not characterized by either chronic or low delinquency. Moreover, their characteristics were more similar to those of women in the fraud and embezzlement group. The researchers attributed the similarity between these last two groups (fraud and violence) to the fact that the women in the violence group had mostly been convicted of domestic violence, meaning that they had no history of a delinquent lifestyle before their crimes and probably committed the offense after experiencing violence themselves in their relationships (Shechory et al., 2011). These studies lead to the conclusion that women commit different types of offenses, and while some of them had histories of victimization and criminal lifestyles, others had experienced no abuse or histories of criminal acts.

Research on pathways to crime divides offenders into two main groups: adolescent-onset offenders who begin their criminal lives as minors, and late-onset offenders who begin their criminal careers as adults (Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Simpson et al., 2016). It was found that in general females’ criminal careers tend to begin at an older age than men’s criminal careers (Baskin & Somers, 1993; Flood-Page et al., 2000). Moffitt and Caspi (2001) found that factors predicting late delinquency among boys and girls are similar, but usually girls’ delinquency starts later than that of boys. Simpsonet al., (2008, 2016) found, as have numerous other studies (See: DeHart, 2018; Katz, 2000; Papalia, 2018; Peterson et al., 2019) that risk factors for female delinquency are physical and sexual abuse in childhood and the use of addictive substances. These studies indicated that there are different predictors for adolescent-onset offenders, usually including cognitive and neuropsychological deficits, a dysfunctional family environment, and physical or sexual abuse. Adolescent-onset offenders also have more extensive offending histories, higher drug involvement (use/dealing), and more offense variety. They also found a large group of female criminals who had few of the few risk factors associated with delinquency. These offenders usually did not have records of delinquency during adolescence and did not suffer from addiction, neglect, or childhood victimization (Kratzer & Hodgins, 1999; Simpson et al., 2016). What did characterize them was victimization arising from abusive intimate relationships, and they usually began their delinquent career at a relatively older age. Similar findings were confirmed in another recent studies (Eriksson, 2018; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2019).

The last decade has witnessed the appearance of new studies describing female offenders as rational and proactive. Ajzenstadt (2009) examined explanations given by delinquent women and their rational decision-making for breaking the law. The study found that the majority of participants described their involvement in a crime as a calculated process. Their deviant behavior was described as a rational choice to achieve goals that they defined as important. In the life stories of these women, their choice of delinquency was an optimal option given the social circumstances and the options available to them. Neissl et al. (2019) tested rational choice theory (RCT) across gender groups. They found that while the performance of RCT is consistent, though not identical, in explaining crime by men and women, for both genders’ the perceptions of the rewards of crime appeared more compelling than the threat of sanctions. These studies indicate a new trend in explaining the motives and causes of delinquent behavior among women, with an emphasis on their being proactive and rational in their decision to break the law. At the same time, these studies examined decision-making regarding the crimes of which the individuals had been convicted and did not consider the decision-making processes of delinquent women throughout their lives. Such an examination could help further the understanding of different criminal life choices.

This spate of recent research tends to examine women’s delinquent behavior in terms of rational choice is the basis of the present study. The main purpose of the present study was to investigate patterns of decision-making and responsibility-taking vs. the compulsion process selection of a criminal lifestyle among female prisoners as reflected in their life stories. Understanding this pattern may help in the development of more appropriate treatment programs for female offenders, based not only on their criminal patterns and victimization, but also on their subjective perceptions of 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 female offenders 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 prison’s capacity is 230 prisoners, with 40% of the prisoners under arrest and awaiting trial and 60% already convicted and 48% of them are first time convicted. The decision to use first-time offenders was based on the assumption, supported by studies, that the number of times an individual 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 (Tomas, 1977; Walters, 2003). Therefore, to minimize the effect of imprisonment as much as possible, only first-time offenders were included in the study. The data collection was done until saturation was reached (Saunders et al., 2018).

Although a small sample seems to be a disadvantage in quantitative researches, it is precisely the opposite in qualitative researches. Crouch and McKenzie (2006) discussed the logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research and argued that this is the way in which analytic, inductive and exploratory studies are best accomplished. This claim was supported by other researchers (Guest et al., 2006; Marshall et al., 2013). After examining 83 IS qualitative studies, Marshall et al. (2013) came to conclusion that qualitative studies should generally include between 20 and 30 interviews. A research review of recent qualitative studies conducted in prison shows that number of participants in quite a few studies is less than 30 (e.g., Duarte, & Carvalho, 2017; Hau & Azad, 2020; Maghsoudi et al., 2018).

Table 1 displays the social-demographic characteristics of the participants and their criminal background.

**[Table 1 about here]**

Table 1 shows that most of the participants were adults, with an average age of 42. Most of them had a minimum education of 12 years, with 43% of participants holding a college degree. The average sentence length was approximately four years. Three prisoners were sentenced to life in prison, and another prisoner was sentenced to 25 years in prison. According to data from the Israel Prison Service System, 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.

These data are consistent with the general female prisoner population in Israel. Although the United States has the highest female prison population rates (1.3% female prisoners in Israel compared to 12.3% female prisoners in the United States) (USSC, 2019), there are some sociodemographic similarities between incarcerated female populations in both countries. Female prisoners both in Israel and the United States are older than male prisoners, were convicted for similar offenses (drug and violence) and have shorter sentence length compared to men.

**[Table 2 about here]**

More than 45% of the participants did not reported experiences of any type of abuse. The information about abuse came from self-reports of the participants telling their life stories. No specific question was asked about abuse. The participants were asked to freely tell about their lives. The inmates volunteered and reported very personal details from their life stories, addressing the difficulties with family members and spouses. The focus of the interview was to let them speak freely and allow them to explain in their own words why they had broken the law. In addition, most of the prisoners who didn’t report abuse, grew up in established families, were well educated, had developed professional careers, and were mostly sentenced for economic offenses. These offenders were characterized by less victimization history, and their criminal acts were driven mostly from a desire to help others and to obtain personal gain (Daly, 1994; Gottschalk, 2020; Mostert, 2018) or by their personality traits (van Herwaarden, 2016).

**Data Collection**

1. ***Life Story Approach*:** A narrative interview is an open, in-depth interview through which the story of the participant is revealed. When an individual describes the course of his or her life, a great dealing 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 perceptions are formed by the participants’ own words, 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. Reference to the offense in **present tense**: “I committed the offense because…”
4. **A 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 prisoners to participate in the research and to obtain their consent. Out of 50 prisoners who agreed to participate, only 38 came to the meeting with the researchers. During the course of the study, four participants asked to withdraw their consent on grounds of unwillingness to be exposed to a stranger, or due to fear of loss of work hours. Another four life stories were not analyzed because the women were not imprisoned for their first offense.

After obtaining written permission, the first stage of the study was conducted, and each prisoner was asked to write her life story without any specific guidelines. The writing took approximately half an hour to an hour and was written in the participants’ mother tongues of Hebrew (26 participants), Russian (3 participants), or English (1 participant). The written life stories were translated by one of the researches whose mother tongue is Russian and both researchers have high levels of English.

The second stage included the narrative interview. The participants were asked to “Please tell us your life story.” At the end of the interview, they were asked to complete three questions from the structured interview. Finally, each participant was asked to answer a personal information questionnaire. It took between two to three hours to conduct each interview.

Using a mixed method of qualitative analysis based on ground theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Urquhart & Fernández, 2016) and content analysis (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1988), we encoded parts of the text 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. While the analysis uncovered many themes, this article references only two of them: the criminal world of the participants, with reference to entering the criminal world and reference to the specific offense for which they were convicted. In addition, the quantitative research method of descriptive statistics was used in order to describe the data more vividly. To maintain originality, the participants’ quotes from their life stories are related faithfully, including any grammatical or linguistic mistakes they made.

**Results**

Research on pathways to crime indicates three main themes than are connected to female criminal life: (a) the offense; (b) the beginning age of the criminal life; and (c) a history of abuse. Life story analysis in this research shows the decision-making of the delinquent life course among women and how their responsibility acknowledgement or choices in their criminal behavior are differ in each of these themes.

**The Beginning Age of the Delinquent Lifestyle and Responsibility**

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

In this context, there was a distinction found between the ten interviewees who began their delinquent life course as minors and the twenty interviewees who first broke the law as adults. This study examined the question of whether the age of the offender’s behavior can be linked to the extent of their taking responsibility for their offense.

**[Table 3 about here]**

**[Table 4 about here]**

Tables 3 and 4 show the differences between offenders whose criminal lifestyle began when they were minors and. offenders who committed their first offense, usually the one for which they were convicted, 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 only. Drug offenses usually involved selling and/or distributing. The second group (*N* = 20) had a very low abuse history. Most of them had suffered from domestic abuse from their spouse or no abuse at all. They had been convicted of various offenses, including domestic violence and economic offenses. Any drug offenses in this group were usually smuggling charges.

**[Table 5 about here]**

A chi-square test was performed to examine the relation between the age of the first offense and responsibility recognition. The relation between these variables was significant, *X2*(2, *N*=30) = 8.143, p= .017. As Table 5 shows, prisoners who began their criminal lifestyle under the age 18 tended to blame the 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.

**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 that they rationally chose to break the law, thus indicating that they took full responsibility for their delinquent behavior. The main reason given for their offense was a desire to make a lot of money quickly.

For example, L., who was convicted of drug trafficking, and began her criminal lifestyle as minor:

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” [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 am 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 two reasons: emotional satisfaction and career development. She began her delinquent behavior out of curiosity and for personal pleasure and continued to sell drugs to support herself financially. Similar explanations characterized offenders who started their delinquent lifestyles as minors. In contrast, participants who broke the law as adults were convicted primarily of financial offenses, and claimed that they had chosen to break the law to obtain material objects and economic abundance, 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, married and a mother of three, who had been convicted of fraud and theft and sentenced to five years in prison, described her life:

My salary is good, but you start thinking about what is needed in life. What else you need?...I was afraid to look at myself and say I did something wrong...Most comfortable in these situations is denial. And on the other hand, I was not 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, [or in] kindergarten too. Challenging [myself] with lots of interest and still bored.

The participant claimed that the desire for economic prosperity and higher social status was stronger and more compelling than the realization that her actions were prohibited and that she was breaking the law. She also pointed out the feeling of boredom that arose even 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 or the control of their actions.

**Blaming the situation or others.** This reaction involves imposing responsibility for the delinquent life course on the situation or on other people. Nine participants (29%) reported that they began a delinquent life course as a result of the impact of the situation to which they had been subjected and were 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 chronic delinquents (60%) than among adult delinquents (15%).

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. They were all 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., who was 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...People that say - the fact that you are convicted of killing because of the influence of alcohol, I agree with that. Alcohol opened the door for me to take out my anger. 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 only under the influence of alcohol did she allow herself to release all her inhibitions and act on her urges. 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 recount 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, and by claiming that their behavior at the time of the offense was the result of blind reliance on their spouses or partner’s decisions, 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] be over. I thought I’d be with this man until 120. 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 that they trusted their spouses or partners, underestimated their own responsibility, and tended to blame their partner for breaking the law. For example, L., who was convicted of fraud and sentenced for four years, related:

I was dumb for believing him [her son-in-law]. Foolishly, he dealt with my invoices, and used his accountant, and so I came 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 reported that they were responsible for their actions, but this responsibility was partial. In their opinion, most of 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 and all of them 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 for 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 usually 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 as having happened to them was becoming involved with a person who 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 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. 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 situation.

**Responsibility for Delinquent Life Course by the 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 violence against a minor or murder of a spouse; and **economic offenses**, such as fraud, embezzlement, theft, and robbery. Table 4 shows three categories of responsibility-taking expressed in the interviews: **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, was. 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 as well as my girls’. I tried to take my girls back [the custody]. I had no money, so I found myself in very dark places… I was fascinated by the offer because I wanted my own house and my girls. And I also said [to myself] what is smuggling? I have the appearance of 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 payed, 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 divided almost equally between tree responsibility acknowledgement. Yet we can see that the main state of the participants was blaming the situation or others for their criminal lifestyles. Most of them committed offenses under the influence of drugs or alcohol. For example, L. was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to 12 years in prison. She described that she was 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 went with them voluntarily. But after the act, she realized what she had done and felt very ashamed. She never told this to her parents. She began drinking alcohol to relive the pain she felt and was very violent to others. At the age of 25, she worked at a club as a security guard. She was drinking and one of the customers assaulted her. She hit him hard with a bottle and killed him. She told us:

They [other offenders] say - the fact that you are here today for the killing is because you did it under the influence of alcohol. I very much agree with that. Alcohol opened the door for me to vent 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 very normal life and worked as a lawyer. Her father got into financial trouble and she decided to help him by borrowed money from a loan shark at a very high interest rate. When couldn't repay the debt, she began stealing money from her clients’ accounts. She was sentenced to three years for fraud:

I do not blame the loan shark for this, only myself…. I was convicted…

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

the money through my ex-husband.

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

**Domestic Violence***.* As with the other crime categories, the majority of these participants claimed to full or partial personal responsibility. For example, S., was convicted for 25 years for conspiracy to commit murder. She was convicted of planning to kill her husband with her lover. At her trial, S. described the abuses she had suffered for years from her late husband, and claimed she didn't know about her lover's plans for killing her husband. But at the end, 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. blamed the situation she had gotten caught up in, lying to the police, and the police determination of her culpability as the main reasons for her conviction, but, in the end, she took responsibility that her actions might have led 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.

**Responsibility for the Current Offense and History of Abuse in Three Time Frames**

The previous analysis addressed the participants’ criminal lifestyles as it reflected from the life story interviews. This chapter presents analysis using Author, et al., (20xx) semi-structured interviews, the references to the offenses of which they had been convicted and the history of abuse 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:

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

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

*Blaming others.* Somebody else committed the criminal act – 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 referring to an offense associated with a greater degree of responsibility-taking varied through three times frames only for the offenders without history of abuse. The claim of responsibility in a hypothetical state occurred more than when the offense was referred to in the present or retrospective perspective. However, the participants who reported suffering from any kind of abuse didn't change their acknowledgement about responsibility for the offense in all three times frames. More than a half the participants acknowledged full responsibility and claimed that they bore most of the responsibility.

Responses to the **depends on me** situation were divided into three subcategories: avoidance of a particular behavior, different thinking, and different behavior. Avoidanceof a particular behavior usually referred to avoiding the use of psychoactive substances: “I would not use drugs,”or avoiding breaking the law: “If I wouldn’t sell the drugs.”

Different thinking referred to thinking about the expected consequences of committing the offense. Such reactions included statements inferring that the offense could have been prevented if “I had self-satisfaction, insights with myself, …, and I could realize the results”; or “If after the first trial I realized the meaning of it”; or “If I was built differently mentally, I might have married someone else.”

Different behavior included contacting relevant help agencies, such as, “If I 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 the participants can be divided into two types:

1. Demand for active support of another party: For example, “If they helped me...if the police or social workers helped me”; or “If I had family support, financial support, if I had steady employment, I wouldn’t go through life I had”; or “If they send me to rehab, they gave me some chances.”
2. Listening requirement: 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 that 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.”

*Blaming others* referred to blaming the victim for the offenses. In three cases, the interviewee saw 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 [to me asking him to drive].”

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, concerning the offense, there is a tendency to take responsibility, with the majority of women inmates in this study referring to their delinquency in terms of partial or full self-responsibility.

**Discussion**

An analysis of the theoretical literature explaining female delinquency reveals an emphasis on two main factors connected to female criminal lifestyle: the age of the first offense (Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Simpson et al., 2016) and the history of abuse (Chen & Gueta, 2016; Katz, 2000; Martin et al., 2008; Trauffer, & Widom, 2017). These factors can lead to drug or alcohol addictions and violent behavior and affect the type of offenses women commit. Similar to previous studies, half of the participants in this study reported physical or sexual abuse in childhood or as adults. Most of them committed violence or drug-related crimes. Yet, most of them did not emphasize the abuse as the main reason for breaking the law and described their actions as rational choice based on profit or loss considerations. On the other hand, half of the participants didn’t report any history of abuse, yet some of them described their action as rational choices, and some blamed others for their convictions.

Examining a history of childhood shows that, like delinquent women, delinquent men suffer from physical sexual and mental abuse (see Burto et al., 1994; Dargis et al., 2016; Dutton & Hart, 1993; Miley et al., 2020; van der Put, 2015). Some studies (e.g., Chen & Gueta, 2016; Martin et al., 2008) found that female offenders have higher rates of emotional and sexual abuse compared to male offenders. Others indicate that female offenders 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 in risk factors for delinquency (see Ryan & Testa, 2005; Watts & Iratzoqui, 2019). For example, Watts and Iratzoqui (2019) found that within the same sample that physical childhood abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect all increased the likelihood of various delinquent behaviors during middle adolescence. Their results suggest that specific types of maltreatment, rather than gender, shape specific delinquent behaviors. However, theories and studies explaining delinquent behavior among men are focused mainly on providing rational explanations for concepts of personal choice and personal and mental gain (Akers, 2017; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Loughran et al., 2011; Sutherland & Cressey, 1992), rather than addressing their delinquency in terms of victimization. In contrast, studies of female delinquency, including current rational choice studies (Becerra & Serra 2019; Goldenson et al., 2007; Hanley & Ruppanner, 2015) claim that female delinquency originates from different motives than does male delinquency. These studies emphasize the victimization of delinquent women by explaining their infractions with the law as a result of mental distress or lack of choice, ignoring rational choice. For example, Chen and Einat (2010) found that most of the women inmates they interviewed were victims of prolonged physical and mental abuse. Yet, the researchers noted that “some of the incarcerated women may not have experienced abuse in their lives, so there is no moral, legal, social, or practical dilemma regarding their incarceration” (Chen & Einat, 2010, p. 200). With the exception of this one remark, there is no real discussion in their book about delinquent women who did not suffer from victimization or who did not consider victimization as the origin of their delinquency.

The assumption that victimization is the origin of female delinquency overlooks women who have not experienced any abuse. These are mainly educated women, some of whom have had successful careers and medium-high socioeconomic status, who are usually sentenced for financial offenses. It can be assumed that these women were influenced by the processes of modernization and the social changes associated with gendered perceptions of career, independence, and equal distribution of social roles (Adler & Adler, 1975; Kossek et al., 2017).

This contention is reinforced when examining the starting age of the criminal lifestyle of the participants. Offenders who began their delinquent lives during adulthood tended to engage in delinquency while doing their normative work. Their crimes were mainly financial offenses: embezzlement, theft, document forgery, and the like. Most of the participants in the present study were convicted of violent and property crimes, which are “classic” offenses, with personal gain and benefit as the motive. Hence, their delinquency can be characterized by the concept of a “career” that involves economic gain, development, and professional progress (Coombs, 1996; Edelstein, 2016). These participants, as well as young participants (aged 18-30), described themselves as acting proactively and assertively, including choosing a career, choosing a partner, and even entering the criminal world. Their answers suggest taking partial or total responsibility for their decisions and behavior, even with regards to deviant and delinquent behavior. In contrast, older offenders (over 30-years-old), tended to describe their criminal behavior as passive and themselves as not guilty or wrongfully convicted. These responses may be linked to stereotypical models of “femininity and masculinity” with which they had been socialized. Thus, they probably found it difficult to break free from the inherent tendency to erase themselves, engaging in passive behavior and shirking responsibility for both their normative and deviant acts. This finding reinforces the assumption of the impact of social change on non-normative aspects of life as well.

For years, there have been two main approaches seeking to explain what leads women to embark upon a criminal lifestyle and to break the law. This approach is also forming the basis for correction intervention. The first is called a gender-specific approach (Caudy et al., 2018; Daley, 1994; Holtfreter, 2015; Vos et al., 2013), also known as a gender-informed (Blanchette & Brown, 2006; Blanchette & Taylor, 2009) or gender-responsive (Bloom et al., 2005, 2006) approach. It is based on the assumption of gender construction and its effects on the behavior of the individual in general and criminal behavior in particular. Hence, the origin of delinquency among women is actually based on their specific psychological needs. In order to rehabilitate them, these needs must be understood and addressed. For example, Saxena et al., (2014) found that women offenders with a history of abuse had beneficial therapy outcomes after participating in gender-sensitive intervention. Day et al., (2015) also found that girls with specific risk factors, like drug abuse or history of trauma, had a lower risk of recidivism compared to delinquent girls without those risk factors. It is quite possible that this outcome can prove of benefit to female offenders with a history of abuse and drug or depression rather than female offenders with no such history. These claims should be addressed in further studies. Yet, it appears that gender-specific treatment stems from the stereotypical view of female offenders as very different from male offenders, and often focuses solely on their personal victim history, while minimizing and normalizing the violent and abusive acts they have committed (Daly, 1994).

The second approach is known as a gender-neutral approach, assumes that the same criminogenic needs lead men and women to adopt a delinquent life style (Andrews et al., 1990; Andrews et al., 2006; Blanchette & Brown, 2006; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013; Rettinger & Andrews, 2010) and emphasizes the assumption of personal responsibility as a prerequisite for a therapeutic process and as a measure of successful rehabilitation (Beech & Fordham, 1997; Fortune et al., 2014). According to this approach, a sense of personal responsibility increases motivation to maintain normative behavior. However, this approach ignores gender-specific issues, like gender inequalities or female criminogenic and non-criminogenic needs (Andrews et al., 2006; Hollin & Palmer, 2006).

In recent years, there has been a reference to a third approach whereby female criminality cannot be explained solely through general causes or gender-specific causes. The thinking is that in order to explain female delinquency, it is necessary to combine the two approaches of a gender-neutral approach that explains general motives for delinquency, and a gender-informed approach that examines the existence of gender-specific factors which can explain female delinquency. A combination of these two approaches can help explain female criminality and better define effective gender-sensitive therapeutic interventions (Cortoni & Gannon, 2011; Cortoni, 2017).

The main finding in the present study showed that more than half of the participants claimed full or partial self-responsibility for engaging in a criminal lifestyle or for the offense of which they had been convicted. This figure was consistent when a distinction was made between the age of the first offense (minors vs. adults) or the history of abuse (no abuse vs. abuse as minors or as adults). This analysis remains consistent in both holistic and categorical analysis. These results support the integrated approach including gender-specific factors like history of abuse or the age of the first offense, and gender-neutral factors of decision-making in terms of rational choice and personal responsibility.

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 & Lopez, 2006; Shechory et al., 2011). Kruttschnitt and Lopez (2006) analyzed the explanations of women convicted of violent offenses. They found that the causes of violence were not childhood or marital abuse, but a wide variety of factors that included a desire for money and respect. Gueta and Chen (2016) found that men and women presented different pathways, but both oscillated between pathways guided by victimization and by power seeking. Brennan et al., (2012) found several pathways to crime among women, some of which indicated minimal abuse as children or as adults. These women offenders presented relatively "normal" behavior, less poverty and less mental problems.

The conclusion of the recent studies (e.g. Ajzenstadt, 2009; Cortoni, 2017; Kruttschnitt & Lopez, 2006; Shechory et al., 2011) similar to present study, indicates that gender differences alone cannot explain the differential phenomena of female delinquency. Consequently, additional factors, such as social status and ethnicity (Ajzenstadt, 2009; Kruttschnitt & Lopez, 2006; Morash et al., 2017; Shechory et al., 2011) context of criminal events (Miller, 2007) or familial and social experience that facilitated criminal behavior (Duarte & de Carvalho, 2017) should be considered. Also, the process of women's decision-making such as taking responsibility or abstaining from it, must be an integral part of understanding the motives for their criminal behavior.

The present study assumes that taking responsibility for the criminal act is the basis for rehabilitation, whereas transferring responsibility to an external party does not allow for effective change or recovery. 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 motivation to maintain normative behavior. Conversely, when an individual’s self-perception is that of a victim, their sense of personal accountability is diminished. This thereby enhances deviant behavior by reinforcing their sense of inability to change the course of their lives. Consequently, transferring responsibility to an outside party may not allow for effective rehabilitation.

This is important to emphasize that the point of view and conclusions of this study does not ignore the understanding that women offenders have experienced different types of victimizations, but rather shifts the operational focus toward a more integrative approach. Noting that women offenders describes their criminal action in terms of choice. The feminist struggle takes place on different levels: political, social, educational, and legislative aspects of the struggle are conducted through increased awareness of sectarian discrimination and the fight against the oppression of women and their rights. This struggle has indeed put women’s inequality and discrimination on the public agenda, but in some areas, especially in the field of ​​crime, female organizations continue to maintain gender inequalities.

The present study highlights the importance of treating female delinquency equitably, rather than stereotypically. The main conclusion of this study about women’s view of their delinquency as a behavior made by choice and their assumption of personal responsibility for their actions should be considered in understanding female criminality as well as a treatment and rehabilitation programs for delinquent women. Understanding the motivation of female criminality and criminal lifestyles as driven not only from victimization but also from personal choice will in our opinion, enable them to reclaim, and for some, to realize for the first time, a sense of control over their lives.

**Limitations**

This study has a potential limitation that needs to be considered. First, the findings are based on a mixed method of qualitative analysis and descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics analysis used in this research indicates patterns, but are not sufficient for qualitative insights. This patterns need to be further investigated using different quantitative analytic approaches in order to show statistically significant relationships and outcomes.

One of the main criteria in this study was for offenders who had been imprisoned for the first time. This criteria significantly limits the number of participants. Moreover, women represent a minority of the inmate population, and the only Israeli women prison has a capacity of 230 offenders (both arrested and convicted). This fact further reduces the number of participants and other factors, such as offense type. As a result, there is small representation of all offenses among study participants.

Second, the conclusions of this study are based on the reports of the interviewees, and not on the actual examination of their behavior, thus limits the generalization of the findings. Yet we should remember that qualitative research is not concentrating on numerical representativity or generalization, but rather on deepening understanding in 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 point out a decision-making process and patterns of choices in criminal lifestyle among female offenders’ explanations it in their own words. We recommend continuing to examine these patterns in further research emphasizing different offenses.