

Perceptions of Middle Aged Men and Women about Women Killers

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Abstract

The present study was conducted to investigate the indigenous perspective of Pakistani women killers. Survey research design was used to explore the possible perceptions for the murders committed by Pakistani women. The data was drawn from middle aged male and females (n=200) with an equal distribution of gender. Purposive convenient sampling was used. The participants were asked to write their perceptions regarding killings by women. The responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The exploratory study indicated that 23% middle aged women perceived that women commit murders in self defense, 19% perceived it to be an attempt to protect their children, 18% perceived that murder is usually the last limit to compromise while 14% perceived that it's a reaction against situation. On the other hand, 20% of middle aged men perceived that murder can be the result of self defense, 20% perceived that it is due to extramarital affairs, 14% perceived that women kill for economic reasons or poverty while 14% perceived that either it is not possible for women or they don't know about the possible reasons behind killings by women. This study has wider implications for the forensic psychologists and women killers significant others to develop an insight that how a victim becomes a killer.

Key words

Perceptions, Killings by Women, Indigenous Perspective, Self-defense

Introduction

Crimes, especially violent crimes seemed to be termed as men's business throughout the human history, for women are perceived in a stereotypical way of being kind, polite, humble, dependent and passive. Violence in women involves multiple factors, as it can be proved through literature review. Patricia Pearson, a crime researcher (1997) stated that throughout the history, violence is considered to be the male phenomena. Men attempted the violence and their possible victims are always women and children; If women commit violence then it is considered to be an involuntary action (Person, 1997).

Earlier in 1950's, explanations of female (and male) crime tended to reflect prevailing views regarding human behavior more generally (Pollock-byrne 1990; Steffensmeier & Clark 1980); social scientists principally emphasized the role of psychological and biological factors in defining female crime. During the 1930's, dominance of the psychological theories were maintained, after that major sociological explanations of crime (differential association, anomie and social disorganization) emerged and stressed the significance of cultural and social factors accountable for criminal behavior.

Existing explanations in the history on female crime recognize a strong biological along with the psychological bias in dealings of female criminality. On the other hand, biological as well as psychological interpretations were also given for male criminal behavior. For example, Lombroso associated both male and female crime with the biological predisposition. However, Lombroso (Lombroso & Ferraro 1895) also perceived female criminals have many male characteristics. He emphasized that biologically, criminal females were highly similar to normal or criminal males as compared to normal females. Some psychologists attribute female offending to “maleness” and “anomaly”.

Prior sociological interpretations which are provided in text books published during 1920's and 1960's, usually rejected this deterministic biological explanation and provided socio-cultural explanations (social disorganization, differential associations and anomie) for both female and male crime along with the gender differences in crime. Steffensmeier and Clark's (1980) review of early criminological texts shows a strong tendency to avoid biological explanations of sex differences in crime, stressing instead structural and cultural variables.

Otto Pollak (1950) in “the criminality of women”, manifests a most significant work on female crime earlier to the modern period.

A basic theme of Pollak's work is the acknowledgment of a psychological and biological basis to female criminality. His ideology is consisted of two central elements of his ideology. First, Pollak emphasized an intrinsically deceiving nature in the female sex. He viewed this deceitfulness to some extent as socially induced because physical weakness can force women to go for deception and because of other primary facts in women's life-including societal demands to conceal her menstruation period and expectations that women attract a husband in some way through wily charm.

Secondly, Pollak suggested the important idea that the biological factors and individual pathology is more crucial as a causative influence in defining female than male criminal behavior. According to him, the influence of generative and hormonal phases (e.g, menstruation, menopause, and pregnancy) was mainly important for female criminal behavior because of the psychological disturbances produced as a result of them. These disturbances might generate “needs” drive crime, or the moral inhibitions of women can be weakened which work to avoid criminal behavior (p.157)

Pollak also observed significant overlap in causative features for criminal behavior among girls and boys, women and men:

“It is either the criminal association in the home or that resulting from the attempts of girls to compensate for the failure of their home or school, which seems

to have a decisive influence upon the causation of juvenile delinquency and professional crime. This picture is basically the same for girls and boys. The differential lies only in the role which illicit sex conduct for monetary gain plays in the shaping of the female criminal career, and in the observation that female professional criminals do not specialize in one line as do men”(p.139)

Pollak also observed that some of the other social factors-the disadvantaged occupational and economic position of women, the double standard of sexual morality, and the dominance of modern advertising – can take women to crime.

We note that gender differences in the quality and quantity of crime persist with the expectations of gender-role, behaviors and opportunities. In fact, considerable changes in the unlawful actions of women would be shocking. There has been a change in attitudes toward greater approval of women in the workplace, including family and career, and more individual latitude has been favored by gender role system. Along with it, many aspects of gender role are more or less similar. As an example, relationships with man is still a defining factor for female status and the traditional gender roles still revolve around the central concerns of beauty issues (e.g. sexual attractiveness, morality), relational issues (e.g. mother -wife) and virtue which are astonishingly stable. Also, there has been a little change reported in male roles, and so it is stated that the overall gender organization has underwent little transformation (Steffensmeier & Streifel 1992; Tannen, 1991).

Perhaps, most importantly, in relation to women in the past, women in the present are also both limited in legal and illegal worlds due to male leadership and due to constructions of their roles by men. Case histories and autobiographical studies of street criminals and professionals show that women still have limited way to criminal underworld and criminal subcultures. Indeed, attitudes of the traditional gender-role and the sexism structure emerge to be more persistent within the arena of crime than “aboveground” (Maher & Daly 1996; Steffensmeier & Terry 1986).

The major focus of research for the last fifteen years on women's use of violence as an outcome of abusive relationships; thus, women's violence is often termed as her reaction against the abusive situation (Shaw & Dubois, 1995). It was generally accepted that battered women will be more inclined to kill their life partner/spouse (Browne, 1987; Block, 1990; Bannister, 1991). Walker (1979) attributes the rise of women in violent homicide to “battered women syndrome”. When women get trapped in such a relationship where they are suffering with emotional and physical turmoil, they develop the feelings of learned helplessness. They are afraid of leaving such relationships due to number of reasons like harassment or financial issues. She also believes that violent behavior actually follows the cyclical pattern and a majority of women are already used to these

situations because of experiencing the same situations in their childhood. Walker (1979) also highlights that battered women have feelings of despair and a tendency of blameworthiness.

Consequently, scientists in social context believe that homicides committed by females are mostly the consequence of women's efforts to secure themselves from their male partner's abusive conduct (Browne, 1987). The major motivations behind such murders committed by women are either protecting themselves from an attack or in situations where their dear ones are under threat or harassed by the abuser as proposed by the self-defense theory. The prevalent perception of these women is that it is not possible for them to avoid this abusive situation (Radford, 1994). However, women who are battered usually fail to seek help from other sources before murdering their partners (Sherman & Berk, 1984).

Similarly Russell (2013) stated that "If a woman commits a crime the common belief is that she is misguided and must have committed crime because of her own victimization, was under the control of others or is simply a criminal deviant whose actions strayed from typical "womanly" behavior"(p.1&2).

Women Criminals in Pakistani Perspective

It is not an accepted fact in Pakistan that a crime would be committed by women. They are usually taken as the victims of crimes committed by man against them. Their active role in case of crime is something which is actually contradicting the general schemas based on our societal norms and strictly inculcated cultural values, and therefore not accepted. Honor killing, acid throwing incidents, rape cases and domestic violence are the most common types of crimes which have been committed against women. Thus, most of our statistical data is frequently showing only this particular side of the picture. No doubt that the large ratio of the crime in Pakistan is actually taking place against women but it doesn't mean that we should avoid the other side of the picture. A woman can also commit serious crimes like murder. Avoidance in this case, only increases the magnitude of the issue.

Few people are taking the initiative to conduct the studies on this avoidant dimension of women personality like a study conducted by Tariq and Anila in (1993) which showed that marital maladjustment is associated to female crimes such as running away from home and committing murder. The results showed that behind criminal acts done by women in Pakistan, marital maladjustment is a significant factor.

Rationale of the Study

The previous literature on this issue is scarce with reference to our indigenous culture; a lot of work has been done in the west. The study attempts to investigate the

gender perspective on the subject of killings by women. The issue that, “why do women kill” needs the attention of the researchers. It is important to explore the perceptions of middle aged population of Pakistan about the involvement of women in heinous crimes like murder. There is a strong need to take such step and to conduct such studies which deal with this ignorant area in respect to our culture.

Objective

- To explore the perceptions of middle aged men and women about killings by women.

Method

Sample

The sample of the study consisted of 200 middle aged people with the distribution of 100 men and 100 women. The age range of the participants was 36 to 55 years.

Research Tool

Open ended Question

In your perception, what are the possible reasons of murders committed by women?

Procedure

Data was drawn middle aged men and women through purposive convenient sampling. The written consent was taken by all the participants. Survey research design was used to gather the opinion of middle aged men and women. Open-ended questions were asked from middle aged men and women about the possible perceptions regarding reasons of why do women kill.

Statistical Analysis

- Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Indicating the Total Percentage of Perceptions that why do women kill in overall sample (male and female) (n=200)
Response items percentage of response

S. No.	Response Items	Percentage of Response
1.	As a reaction against situation	10.5%
2.	Last limit of compromise	9.5%
3.	Mental problems	8.5%
4.	Failure in relation	6.5%
5.	Self defense	21.5%
6.	Helplessness	8%
7.	Revenge	8.5%
8.	To protect her rights	7%
9.	Rape	4%
10.	Jealousy	6.5%
11.	Economic reasons	9.5%
12.	Fulfillment of her desires or materialism	8.5%
13.	Aggression	4%
14.	Rivalry or second marriage of husband	8%
15.	Hopelessness	3%
16.	Cheating or extramarital affairs	14.5%
17.	For children	13%
18.	As a last option	6%
19.	To defend her mistakes	5%
20.	Ignorance	6%
21.	Social injustice	5%
22.	Social issues	4%
23.	Self esteem	2.5%
24.	Domestic violence	6.5%
25.	Patriotism	1%
26.	In honor	1.5%
27.	Unavoidable situations	2.5%
28.	Possessiveness	1%
29.	Not possible for women	10%

Table 2. Descriptive statistics indicating the perceptions that why do women kill by females (n=100)

S. No.	Reasons Reported by Females	Percentage of Response
1.	As a reaction against situation	14%
2.	No other option	9%
3.	As a last limit to compromise	18%
4.	Helplessness	11%
5.	To defend her mistakes	5%
6.	To protect her rights	7%
7.	Inferiority complexes and ignorance	7%
8.	Lack of justice	3%
9.	Self defense	23%
10.	Lack of social support	6%
11.	Relation or due to love failures	10%
12.	Cheating or mistrusting	7%
13.	Frustration	9%
14.	Restrictions	2%
15.	Aggression	6%
16.	Psychological disorders or stress	7%
17.	Unavoidable situations	4%
18.	Revenge	9%
19.	Rivalry/second marriage of husbands	4%
20.	Rape	5%
21.	Materialistic objectives /fulfillment of desire	8%
22.	For children	19%
23.	Jealousy	3%
24.	Extreme oppression or torture	5%
25.	Extramarital affairs	2%
26.	Hopelessness	4%
27.	To protect her family	4%
28.	Poverty /economic reasons	5%
29.	Adjustment issues	2%
30.	Don't know /not possible for women	5%
31.	Experimenting with different options	1%

S. No.	Reasons Reported by Females	Percentage of Response
32.	Impulsiveness	1%
33.	Extreme possessiveness	1%
34.	To protect her self esteem	1%
35.	Lack of basic needs	1%
36.	Failure to follow conventional rules	1%
37.	In honor	1%
38.	Patriotism	1%
39.	Social issues	1%
40.	Just give up	1%

Table 3. Descriptive statistics indicating the perceptions that why do women kill by Males (n=100)

S. No.	Reasons Reported by Males	Percentage of Response
1.	Aggression	2%
2.	As a last limit of compromise	1%
3.	Revenge	8%
4.	As a reaction	7%
5.	Psychological issues	10%
6.	Relations or due to love failures	3%
7.	Helplessness	5%
8.	Jealousy	7%
9.	Economic reasons /poverty	14%
10.	Materialism or desires	9%
11.	For rights	7%
12.	Cheating or extramarital affairs	20%
13.	Rape	3%
14.	Self defense	20%
15.	Rivalry/second marriage of husbands	12%
16.	To defend her mistakes	5%
17.	As last option	3%
18.	For children	7%
20.	Illiteracy	6%
21.	Social injustice	7%
22.	Less knowledge of religion	2%
23.	Ignorance (by society or relations)	5%
24.	Domestic violence	8%
25.	Social issues	7%
26.	Emotional issues	3%
27.	In honor	2%
28.	Ask women	4%
29.	Don't know/not possible for women	14%
30.	Self esteem	3%
31.	Hopelessness	2%
32.	Patriotism	1%

S. No.	Reasons Reported by Females	Percentage of Response
33.	Hormonal stress/imbbalances	1%
34.	Discrimination on the basis of gender by parents	1%
35.	Possessiveness	1%
36.	Lack of tolerance	1%
37.	Difficult situations	1%

Chart 1

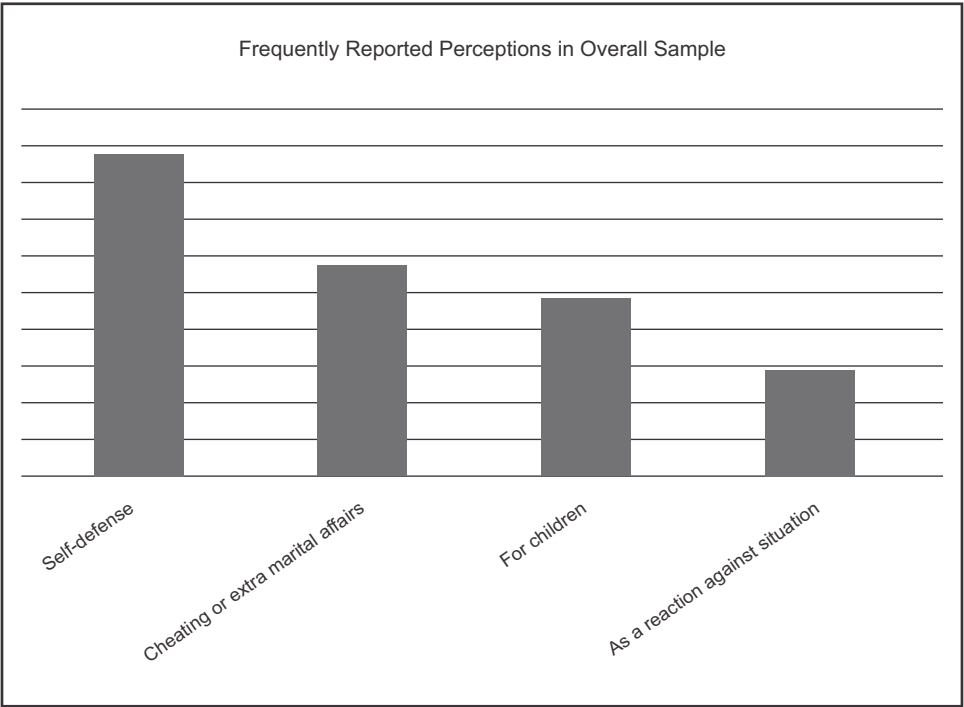


Chart 1

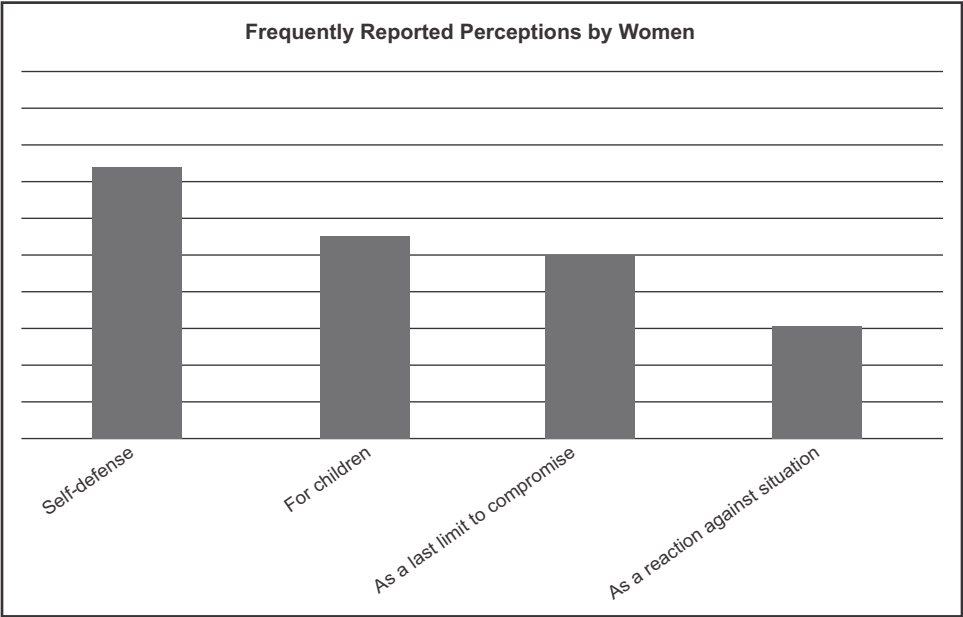
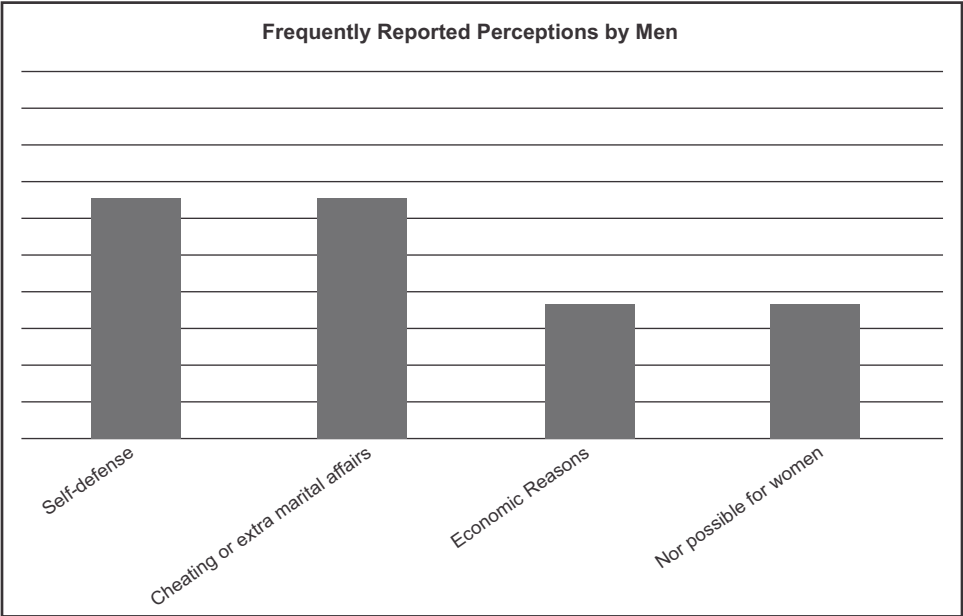


Chart 1



Discussion

The findings of this exploratory study portrayed the perception of middle aged people about “why do women kill” phenomenon. The aim of the study is to develop an understanding about the indigenous perspective of the issue under consideration.

The quantitative study based on survey approach indicated the perceptions of middle aged men and women about why do women kill with respect to our cultural context. In overall sample of middle age men and women (n=200) the highest ratio of the perceptions about murdering by women in socio-psychological perspective of Pakistani culture are self-defense (21.5%), cheating or extramarital affairs (14.5%) for children (13%) and as a reaction against their situation (10.5%). The higher proportion of sample also perceived that women can't commit such a heinous crime due to stereotypical concept of women just victim and not accepting their proactive role in case of crime; that it is simply not possible for women. Females perceived that self-defense could be the most possible factor behind murders committed by women (23%). In the light of this descriptive analysis we can say that females perceive that women kill in self defense in order to protect themselves for instance, in case of dacoity, robbery and rape etc. Killing someone in self defense is that killer killed in order to save herself. It is generally accepted that women would be more inclined to kill their partners if they are battered women and if their partners have abused them (Browne, 1987; Block, 1990; Bannister, 1991). Consequently, scientists in social context believe that homicides committed by females are mostly the consequence of women's efforts to secure themselves from their male partner's abusive conduct (Browne, 1987). The principal motivations behind women committing such murders are either protecting themselves from an attack or in situations where their dear ones are under threat or harassed by the abuser as proposed by self-defense theory. The prevalent perception of these women is that it is not possible for them to avoid this abusive situation (Radford, 1994). However, women who are battered frequently show many ineffective efforts to gain outside involvement before murdering their partners (Sherman & Berk, 1984).

Women can also kill in order to protect their children and even sometimes kill their children to protect them from poverty and other situations of possible crisis (19%). As research proposed that the mothers who murdered their children are more probable to be single, economically ruined and young. The findings support Daly (1998) that the possible adversity the women and their babies would face in the future actually facilitate the women to dispose of an infant and for them murder appeared to be an act of aggravation over their inability to rise above their situations (Daly, 1988).

Females mostly perceived that women can commit murder as a possible reaction against their situation (14%). So this perception matches with what our print media also reports that mother poisoned her children or drowned her children to help them escape the vicious cycle of poverty. They can also commit murder when no more compromise is possible for them in order to protect themselves, their loved ones or their relationships (18%). According to some other common perceptions regarding murders committed by women are that women can also murder any one when she thinks herself as helpless (11%), when she thinks that no one can help her and that she has to do something for her own sake. It has been perceived also that murder can be a result of betrayal or disappointment in women's relationships (10%). This shows the concern of the respondents about the extramarital affairs of the husbands and this male dominated society expects that wives should remain silent and tolerate but sometimes this emotional turmoil can drive women to kill their husbands for being disloyal.

Males perceived that women can commit murder due to self defense (**20%**) in situations where their honor is at stake. They perceived that the principal motivations behind women committing such murders are either protecting themselves from an attack or in situations where their dear ones are under threat or harassed by the abuser as proposed by self-defense theory. We can say that men and women perceive that in order to protect themselves from the threatening situation women kill. This reflects that gender role of women as caring, sensitive, nurturing shapes the perception of men and women about women killers. This finding also supports Russell's (2013) extensive work on perception of female offenders which illustrates that it is very difficult to perceive women as "dangerous" as it mismatches with gender roles of nurturing and passive nature.

The commonly stated perceptions in male sample are that murder can be result of cheating or extramarital affairs sometimes of their husbands and sometimes their own illicit affairs too (**20%**), can be the result of rivalry/ second marriage of husband (12%), due to poverty or economic reasons in order to protect themselves or their loved ones (14%). While another possible perception for murder to be committed by women can be psychological issues (10%). Keeping in view the perceptions of men about women killers, it is interesting that men have full realization that it is really hard for wives to digest the extra marital affairs of their husbands and sometimes their own involvements with men result in murder of a lover. Perceptions of males have also portrayed another sensitive issue that murder can be the result of second marriage of husband as the concept of "SOTHAN" in our society is highly disapproved.

Interestingly, a clear majority of men also perceived that either it is not possible for women or that they don't know about it (14%). Surprisingly 14% of the male respondents said they don't know what makes women kill which reflects their ignorance towards this bitter reality. Other perceptions mentioned in sample are psychological problems, failures in relation, helplessness, revenge, to protect her rights, rape, jealousy, fulfillment of her desires or materialism, aggression, hopelessness, cheating or betrayal of trust, as a last option, to defend her mistakes, ignorance, social injustice, social issues, self esteem, domestic violence, patriotism, in honor, unavoidable situations and possessiveness.

Some of the perceptions reported only by males regarding murders committed by men were illiteracy, less knowledge of religion; emotional issues, and discrimination on gender by parents, hormonal stress /imbalance and lack of tolerance. Likewise some of the perceptions were reported only by females; frustration, restrictions, to protect family, adjustment issues, experimenting with different options, impulsiveness, lack of basic needs and failure to follow conventional rules.

Differences are also reported in terms of percentages of perceptions between the two samples. The frequently reported perceptions by the women for killings by women were self defense (23%), for children (19%), as a last limit to compromise (18%) and as a reaction against situation (14%); whereas the most frequently reported perceptions by men were self-defense (20%), cheating or extramarital affairs (20%), economic reasons/poverty (14%) and not possible for women (14%). The results support Russell (2013) that female offenders commit crime because of their own victimization.

Conclusion

The study explored the perceptions of middle aged people regarding the possible factors behind murder committed by women. The data indicated that most of the middle aged men and women perceive that women kill in self-defense. Secondly the study highlights psychosocial factors such as poverty, second marriage of the husband, extramarital affairs of husbands which turn these 'perceived benign women' into brutal killers. The study indicates that perceiving women as offenders mismatches with our schema of women as sensitive, caring and weak heavily shaped by the societal gender roles.

Limitations

1. The present study deals with the perspective of middle aged people only.
2. Purposive Convenient sampling was used which reduces the generalizability.

Implications

1. The study has widespread implications for the forensic psychologists.
2. It helps to develop an awareness regarding the ignorant aspect of women personality.
3. It helps in developing the policies regarding women criminals.
4. The study deals with the perceptions of middle age people about why women kill.

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