
GENDER DIMENSIONS IN JUVENILE JUSTICE: PROTECTION OF GIRL CHILDREN IN CONFLICT WITH LAW

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ABSTRACT

The girl child in conflict with law occupies a unique and often invisible position within juvenile justice systems globally. Despite constituting a numerical minority within youth justice populations, girls face disproportionate vulnerabilities, distinct pathways to offending, and systemic responses that frequently fail to address their specific needs. This paper examines the gender dimensions of juvenile justice, analysing the international legal framework for protecting girl children, the distinctive characteristics of girls' offending trajectories, the phenomenon of gendered decision-making within justice systems, and the challenges arising from their minority status. Drawing upon feminist criminological perspectives and attribution theory, this research argues that effective protection requires moving beyond gender-neutral approaches toward genuinely gender-responsive interventions that recognise the intersectional nature of girls' experiences. The paper concludes with recommendations for law, policy, and practice that would strengthen the protection of girl children in conflict with law.

KEYWORDS: juvenile justice, girl children, gender dimensions, children's rights, gender-responsive approaches, feminist criminology.

1. INTRODUCTION

The interface between children and the justice system has attracted significant scholarly attention and international normative development over recent decades. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) establishes a comprehensive framework recognising children's entitlement to special protections by virtue of their developmental stage and inherent

vulnerability. Within this broader landscape, however, the situation of girl children in conflict with law remains inadequately theorised and addressed. Girls typically constitute approximately 15 per cent of children in youth justice systems across jurisdictions, yet this numerical minority masks profound and distinctive needs that render them particularly vulnerable to rights violations.

The protection of girl children in conflict with law demands examination through multiple lenses: the international human rights framework, the distinctive pathways that bring girls into contact with the justice system, the gendered nature of decision-making by justice actors, and the practical challenges arising from their minority status within custodial populations. As the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has observed, girls face disproportionate risks relative to boys due to deeply entrenched structures of inequality, discrimination, and sexual and gender-based violence. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for fulfilling States' legal obligations but also for developing interventions that genuinely address the underlying causes of girls' offending and prevent further victimisation within the justice system itself.

This paper advances the argument that the protection of girl children in conflict with law requires a fundamental reconceptualisation of juvenile justice approaches. It contends that gender-neutral frameworks, while appearing equitable, systematically fail to address girls' distinctive needs and may inadvertently compound the harms they experience. Drawing upon feminist criminological scholarship and international human rights law, the paper examines three central themes: first, the international legal framework governing the treatment of girl children in conflict with law; second, the distinctive pathways and vulnerabilities that characterise girls' engagement with offending behaviours; and third, the systemic responses including decision-making practices and custodial arrangements that shape girls' experiences of justice. The paper concludes by identifying principles for reform that would strengthen the protection of girl children within juvenile justice systems.

2. The International Legal Framework: Rights and Protections

2.1 Foundational Principles: The Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides the foundational international law framework for protecting children in conflict with law. Article 37 establishes that the arrest, detention, or imprisonment of a child shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time. Article 40 elaborates the rights of children alleged as, accused of, or recognised as having infringed the penal law, including the right to treatment

that takes account of the child's age and promotes the child's reintegration and constructive role in society.

These provisions apply to all children without discrimination, yet the CRC itself has been subject to critique regarding its treatment of gender dimensions. As Dr Clara Chapdelaine-Feliciati has argued, the Convention exhibits a 'unique silence' concerning the specific vulnerabilities of girl children, failing to explicitly address forms of gender-based violence that disproportionately affect girls, including child marriage, female genital mutilation, and femicidal violence committed in the name of honour. This silence has implications for girls in conflict with law, as the underlying victimisation that frequently precedes their offending remains inadequately recognised within the rights framework.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child, through its General Comments, has sought to address this gap. General Comment No. 10 on children's rights in juvenile justice emphasises that States parties should pay particular attention to the situation of girls in the justice system, recognising that they may be more vulnerable to discrimination and victimisation. General Comment No. 20 on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence similarly calls upon States to develop gender-sensitive policies that address the specific situation of adolescent girls.

2.2 Complementary International Instruments

Beyond the CRC, multiple international instruments contribute to the normative framework for protecting girl children in conflict with law. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in General Recommendation No. 33 on women's access to justice, directs particular attention to the challenges faced by girls. It observes that girls often lack the social or legal capacity to make significant decisions about their lives in areas relating to education, health, and sexual and reproductive rights, and may be forced into marriage or subjected to other harmful practices and various forms of violence.

The United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders commonly known as the Bangkok Rules represent a significant development in recognising the specific needs of women and girls in custodial settings. Rules 36 to 39 address the situation of juvenile female offenders, acknowledging that girls constitute a minority of the overall number of adjudicated children globally but require particular safeguards due to their vulnerability. The Bangkok Rules stipulate safeguards concerning searches of women, girls, and their children, and emphasise the need for gender-specific health care and support services.

The United Nations Model Strategies and Practical Measures on the Elimination of Violence Against Children in the Field of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice further reinforce these protections, identifying the importance of legislative change to prohibit all forms of gender-based violence against children and countering attitudes that condone such violence.¹² These instruments collectively establish that access to justice for girls requires gender-sensitive laws, procedures, and institutional practices.

2.3 The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) provides additional protections relevant to girl children in conflict with law. Article 14(4) requires that in the case of juvenile persons, the procedure shall be such as will take account of their age and the desirability of promoting their rehabilitation. The Human Rights Committee, in General Comment No. 13, elaborated that juveniles are to enjoy at least the same guarantees and protection as are accorded to adults, and that States should provide information concerning special arrangements for juveniles that take account of the desirability of promoting their rehabilitation.

General Comment No. 28 on the equality of rights between men and women specifically addresses the situation of accused juvenile females, calling upon States parties to report on compliance with the rule that they shall be separated from adults and on any difference in treatment between male and female persons deprived of liberty, such as access to rehabilitation and education programmes and to conjugal and family visits.

2.4 The Challenge of Implementation

Despite this comprehensive international framework, significant implementation gaps persist. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has repeatedly expressed concern about States parties' reservations to Article 37(c) of the CRC, which requires that children be detained separately from adults. Several States have entered reservations to this provision, with implications that are particularly acute for girls. As the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children has documented, the low number of girls detained in many jurisdictions means that they may be held with adult women, placed in isolation, or held in facilities remote from their homes arrangements that carry disproportionate risks for their safety and well-being.

The implementation challenge extends beyond custodial arrangements to encompass the full spectrum of justice system engagement. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has

consistently emphasised that effective implementation requires specialised judges, prosecutors, lawyers, and other personnel qualified to work with children, including training on gender-sensitive approaches. Yet many countries lack such specialised personnel and the resources to provide requisite training, with consequences that fall most heavily on marginalised groups including girls.

3. Understanding Girls' Pathways to Offending

3.1 The Prevalence of Victimization

Research across multiple jurisdictions consistently demonstrates that girls in conflict with law have experienced disproportionately high rates of victimisation, particularly sexual and gender-based violence. Studies indicate that between 30 and 70 per cent of justice-involved girls have experienced sexual abuse, with many having endured repeated victimisation across multiple contexts including the home, on the streets, in state care, and subsequently in custody. This overrepresentation of sexually abused girls in contact with the criminal justice system represents one of the most consistent findings in youth justice research.²¹

The relationship between victimisation and offending is complex and mediated by multiple factors. Girls who have experienced abuse may engage in behaviours including running away, substance use, and survival crimes such as theft or sex work that bring them into contact with the justice system. These behaviours can be understood as coping mechanisms or survival strategies in response to trauma, yet they are frequently criminalised without adequate attention to their underlying causes. As the United Kingdom's All Party Parliamentary Group on Women in the Penal System observed, girls may be more harshly treated by courts precisely because of their greater welfare needs, with the justice system responding to victimisation with punishment rather than support.

3.2 Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma

Beyond sexual victimisation, justice-involved girls exhibit elevated rates of adverse childhood experiences across multiple domains. Data from the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales indicates that girls in the justice system are significantly more likely than boys to be identified as having a high or very high level of safeguarding need. They are more likely to be children in need, subject to child protection plans, in the care system, and to have siblings in care. Mental health concerns are identified in over 80 per cent of cases involving girls, compared to approximately 69 per cent for boys.

The mental health literature indicates that girls are more likely than boys to internalise mental distress, with higher rates of anxiety, depression, and self-harm. These internalising behaviours may be less visible to justice system actors than the externalising behaviours more commonly exhibited by boys, contributing to a pattern in which girls' distress goes unrecognised or is misinterpreted as deliberate non-compliance or manipulation.

The implications of trauma for justice system involvement are profound. Girls with trauma histories require particular safeguards and therapeutic supports in custodial settings, yet such supports are frequently unavailable or inadequate. Moreover, the experience of custody itself may re-traumatise girls who have histories of abuse, particularly where custodial arrangements expose them to further violence or where security procedures such as strip-searches replicate the dynamics of prior victimisation.

3.3 Structural Disadvantage and Intersectionality

Understanding girls' pathways to offending requires attention to the structural inequalities that shape their lives. Girls who come into contact with the justice system are disproportionately from marginalised backgrounds: they are disproportionately poor, disproportionately from racial and ethnic minority groups, and disproportionately likely to be LGBTQ+. These intersecting dimensions of identity and disadvantage shape both their pathways into the justice system and their experiences within it.

Research from Australia examining the experiences of Indigenous girls illustrates the importance of intersectional analysis. Indigenous girls face unique challenges arising from the legacies of colonisation, ongoing racial discrimination, and the over-representation of Indigenous children in child protection and youth justice systems. Their experiences cannot be adequately understood through analyses that consider gender alone or Indigeneity alone; rather, it is the intersection of these dimensions that produces distinctive patterns of vulnerability and system response.

Similarly, research from the United States has documented how Black girls are often perceived by justice system actors as less innocent and more adult-like than White girls, with consequences for how their behaviour is interpreted and sanctioned. This 'adultification' of Black girls contributes to more punitive responses and reduced access to the protections and supports available to their White peers. Muslim girls may experience a form of religious misogyny, with transgressions attracting more serious sanctions as they are seen to violate stereotypes of being 'passive and oppressed', while simultaneously being isolated from community resources due to heightened stigma within their communities.

3.4 Status Offences and the Criminalisation of Survival

A distinctive feature of girls' engagement with juvenile justice systems is their overrepresentation among children charged with status offences behaviours that would not be criminal if committed by adults, such as running away, truancy, curfew violations, or being deemed 'incorrigible'.³⁵ These offences frequently arise from girls' attempts to escape abusive home environments or respond to unsafe situations, yet they result in justice system involvement rather than protection.

The phenomenon of 'bootstrapping' whereby girls are subjected to secure confinement for status offences through technical violations of probation or contempt proceedings has been documented across multiple jurisdictions. Girls may be placed on probation for status offences and subsequently detained for violating probation conditions, effectively circumventing legal restrictions on the detention of status offenders. This pattern results in girls being confined for behaviours that do not constitute crimes while boys who have committed actual criminal offences may receive more lenient treatment.

The criminalisation of survival behaviours reflects what feminist criminologists have identified as the persistent influence of paternalism in juvenile justice. Girls' behaviour is evaluated against gendered expectations of appropriate conduct, with those who violate these expectations by being sexually active, by being disobedient, by failing to conform to norms of feminine passivity attracting punitive responses justified as being in their own best interests. As Anderson and colleagues argue, exemptions in policy that allow system actors to exercise discretion are systematically employed for girls to justify a more severe court response when they perceive girls' own safety is at risk, resulting in a court response that counters rehabilitative mandates.

4. Gendered Attributions and Decision-Making

4.1 Attribution Theory and Juvenile Justice

Attribution theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how justice system actors perceive and respond to girls' behaviour. In their formative work, Bridges and Steen examined how court officers' perceptions regarding the causes of delinquency differ between White youth and youth of colour, with implications for risk assessments and sentencing recommendations. Extending this framework to consider gender, researchers have documented how actors apply broad, individual-focused, stereotypical thinking to understand girls' behaviour.

Studies examining probation officers' case files have found that officers are more likely to make positive attributions for boys' behaviour for example, accepting responsibility while making more negative attributions about girls' contexts and their histories of abuse. Interviews with juvenile probation officers have provided rich evidence of stereotypical perceptions that girls are more difficult to work with than boys, with girls described using terms such as 'manipulative' and 'promiscuous'. These attributions shape how officers assess risk and make recommendations regarding disposition.

4.2 The Persistence of Paternalism

Contemporary research confirms that paternalism remains a persistent feature in how the justice system locates, defines, and responds to girls. Anderson and colleagues' multimethod qualitative study of system-involved girls found that court actors hold gendered attributions of girls' delinquency that inform their decision-making about how to treat and sanction girls. These attributions operate through multiple dimensions: the location of the cause of deviant behaviour, the attribution of blame, the implied target of intervention, the characterisation of the role of context, and the visibility of structural inequity and rights in framing the behaviour and subsequent responses.

The researchers identified three frameworks through which actors understand girls' delinquency. From a person-centered perspective, the problem is located directly within the individual girl her abnormal thoughts, feelings, or actions. Context is characterised as relatively unimportant, and blame is attributed almost exclusively to the individual, with structural inequities rendered invisible.⁴⁵ From a person-mediated perspective, the problem is understood as having developed due to the individual's contexts, but these contexts are important only to the extent that they have 'damaged' the girl. While context is acknowledged, the target of intervention remains the individual girl, and structural inequities are peripheral. From an ecological perspective, by contrast, the problem is located directly in sociostructural contexts, and the target of change is the institutional and structural environment rather than the individual girl.

The persistence of person-centered and person-mediated frameworks among justice system actors has profound implications for girls. When girls' behaviour is understood as arising from individual pathology or damage, interventions focus on fixing the girl rather than addressing the structural conditions poverty, racism, gender-based violence, inadequate child protection systems that shape her life. Girls are held responsible for behaviours that represent

adaptations to impossible circumstances, and the justice system becomes another site of victimisation rather than a source of protection and support.

4.3 The Punishment of Gender Non-Conformity

A consistent finding across jurisdictions is that girls who exhibit gender norm-violating behaviours receive harsher punishments from the legal system, including longer sentences, compared with their male counterparts. This pattern reflects what might be termed the 'double deviance' of girls who offend: they have violated not only the criminal law but also gendered expectations of appropriate feminine behaviour. Their lawbreaking is seen as particularly shocking, and responses are correspondingly severe.

This punitive response to gender non-conformity operates alongside a pattern of leniency for girls who conform to gendered expectations. Some evidence exists for gender-based leniency limited to first-time offenders who exhibit gender-congruent behaviours rooted in middle-class, White norms at early stages of criminal processing. This bifurcated response leniency for conforming girls, punitiveness for non-conforming girls reveals the operation of gendered surveillance within juvenile justice. Girls are evaluated not simply on their offending behaviour but on their conformity to idealised constructions of girlhood, with those who deviate attracting interventions justified as being in their own interests.

4.4 Race, Class, and Compounding Disadvantage

The operation of gendered attributions is complicated by intersections with race and class. Research has documented that Black girls are often viewed as more mature for their age, more responsible, and less vulnerable than their White peers, with consequences including more punitive sanctions and reduced access to support services. This adultification of Black girls means that they are less likely to benefit from the protections that juvenile justice systems purport to offer and more likely to be treated as fully responsible for their actions.

Class similarly shapes how girls are perceived and treated within justice systems. Girls from middle-class backgrounds may be more likely to attract therapeutic responses, with their behaviour attributed to underlying emotional difficulties requiring treatment, while girls from poor and working-class backgrounds are more likely to attract punitive responses, with their behaviour attributed to moral failing or dangerousness. These class-based distinctions interact with gender in complex ways, producing patterns of differential treatment that are inadequately captured by analyses focusing on gender alone.

5. The Minority Status Challenge: Custodial Arrangements and Service Provision

5.1 The Numbers Problem

Girls consistently constitute a small minority of children in youth justice systems, typically around 15 per cent of community-based caseloads and an even smaller proportion of the custodial population. In England and Wales, for example, the average monthly custodial population of girls in the year ending March 2023 was just twelve. This numerical minority status creates distinctive challenges for protecting girls' rights and meeting their needs.

The European Guidelines on Child-friendly Justice recognise that girls, as a minority, can have their needs overlooked, recommending that they be paid special attention through gender-sensitive provision.⁵⁵ Yet translating this recognition into practice proves difficult when girls are thinly spread across custodial estates and community-based services. The small numbers make it economically challenging to provide specialised programmes and facilities, while the concentration of girls in a small number of custodial sites may place them far from their families and communities, undermining prospects for reintegration.

5.2 Custodial Arrangements and Their Consequences

The low number of girls detained creates particular challenges for custodial arrangements. In many jurisdictions, the absence of dedicated juvenile female facilities means that girls may be held with adult women, placed in isolation, or held in facilities that are remote from their homes.⁵⁶ Each of these arrangements carries significant risks.

Holding girls with adult women exposes them to the risks associated with adult prison environments, including violence, exploitation, and the criminogenic influences of adult offenders. While adult women's prisons may offer better access to programmes and services than juvenile facilities, they are not designed to meet the developmental needs of adolescent girls and may expose them to women whose offending profiles and life experiences are very different from their own.

Isolation as an alternative to mixing with adults carries its own risks. Girls held alone or in very small groups within larger juvenile facilities may experience acute loneliness and restricted access to education, recreation, and therapeutic programmes. They may be subject to heightened scrutiny and control, with their behaviour attracting disproportionate attention from staff. The psychological impacts of isolation on adolescent development are poorly understood but likely to be significant, particularly for girls with histories of trauma and mental health difficulties.

Remote placement, where girls are held in the only available facility for their region regardless of distance from home, undermines family contact and community ties that are crucial for successful reintegration. Girls may receive few visits from family members who cannot afford long-distance travel, and their relationships with community-based professionals social workers, mental health practitioners, youth workers may be disrupted. The importance of trusted and consistent relationships for justice-involved girls, many of whom have experienced a 'conveyor belt' of professionals coming in and out of their lives, is well-documented, yet remote placement systematically undermines these relationships.

5.3 Service Provision and Gender-Responsive Programming

The minority status of girls also creates challenges for service provision. Programmes designed for the majority male population may not address girls' distinctive needs, yet the small numbers of girls may not justify the development of separate, gender-responsive services. Even where such services exist, they may be concentrated in particular locations, creating access problems for girls in community settings.

Research on effective interventions for justice-involved girls highlights the value of gender-responsive approaches that provide integrated support rather than addressing single problems. Effective interventions should address trauma and recognise the significance of mental health issues, recognise the importance of relationships in girls' lives and use these to construct alternative attitudes and lifestyles, focus on building upon strengths and promoting resilience, and promote the constructive use of networks of support including family, professional, and social networks.

Examples of evidence-informed approaches include projects combining gender-specific mentoring with sporting and cultural activities, such as the 'Getting Out for Good' project in the United Kingdom. Evaluation of such approaches suggests that they can produce positive results in relation to recidivism and other outcomes including the development of positive support systems, access to employment, and increases in self-esteem and empowerment. However, the availability of such programmes remains limited, and many girls continue to receive services designed for boys or generic services that fail to address their specific needs.

5.4 Transitions and Aftercare

The transition from custody to community represents a particularly vulnerable period for all children, but girls face distinctive challenges. Inspection data from England and Wales indicates that preparation for release is frequently undermined by lack of support in the

community, with girls facing difficulties accessing accommodation, education, or health care support upon release. Many girls remain in secure placements under welfare or health care legislation rather than returning to community settings, raising questions about the appropriateness of their initial placement in the justice system.

Transitions are complicated by the age at which responsibility passes from youth to adult services. Girls moving from youth to adult provision at ages 17 or 18 may experience disruption in relationships with trusted professionals and gaps in service provision. Given the importance of consistent relationships for this population, such transitions require careful planning and coordination that is frequently absent.

6. Towards Gender-Responsive Juvenile Justice

6.1 Principles for Reform

The analysis presented in this paper supports the identification of principles to guide reform of juvenile justice systems to better protect girl children in conflict with law. First, reform must be grounded in a recognition that gender-neutral approaches are insufficient and may actively harm girls by rendering their distinctive needs and experiences invisible. As feminist criminologists have long argued, treating everyone the same when they start from different positions produces unequal outcomes.

Second, reform must adopt an intersectional approach that recognises how gender intersects with race, class, Indigeneity, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity and disadvantage. Girls are not a homogeneous group, and interventions that fail to attend to these intersections will reproduce patterns of inequality and exclusion.

Third, reform must address the structural conditions that shape girls' pathways into the justice system. This requires investment in child protection systems, mental health services, education, and poverty reduction, as well as attention to the criminalisation of survival behaviours and status offences. The justice system cannot compensate for failures in other systems, and efforts to protect girls within juvenile justice must be accompanied by broader social reform.

Fourth, reform must attend to the full spectrum of justice system engagement, from initial contact with police through custodial placement to aftercare and reintegration. Gender-responsive approaches are needed at every stage, informed by understanding of girls' distinctive needs and experiences.

6.2 Legislative and Policy Reform

At the legislative level, States should review their juvenile justice laws to ensure they address the specific situation of girls. This includes removing status offences from the jurisdiction of juvenile courts or establishing clear safeguards to prevent the detention of children for such offences. Legislation should prohibit the placement of girls in adult facilities and establish that girls deprived of liberty shall be held in facilities that are appropriate for their age, gender, and needs.

Policy development should be informed by data collection that is disaggregated by gender and other relevant dimensions. The lack of gender-disaggregated data in many jurisdictions makes it impossible to monitor girls' experiences of the justice system or evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. States should establish systems for collecting and publishing data on girls' involvement with police, courts, and custodial institutions, as well as on the availability and uptake of gender-responsive programmes.

National action plans on juvenile justice should include specific provisions for girls, with measurable targets and monitoring mechanisms. These plans should be developed in consultation with girls who have experience of the justice system, as well as with organisations working on girls' rights and gender equality.

6.3 Training and Professional Development

The persistence of gendered attributions among justice system actors highlights the importance of training and professional development. Judges, prosecutors, lawyers, probation officers, and custodial staff require training on child development, the impact of trauma, gender-responsive approaches, and the distinctive pathways that bring girls into conflict with law. Training should address unconscious bias and the operation of stereotypes, equipping professionals to recognise and challenge their own assumptions about girls and their behaviour.

Training alone is insufficient, however, and must be accompanied by institutional mechanisms that support gender-responsive practice. This may include specialised roles for professionals working with girls, supervision and mentoring arrangements that support reflective practice, and accountability mechanisms that monitor outcomes for girls and identify disparities requiring attention.

6.4 Service Development and Delivery

The development of gender-responsive services for justice-involved girls requires investment and innovation. Services should be trauma-informed, recognising the prevalence of victimisation among this population and avoiding practices that may re-traumatise. They should be strengths-based, building on girls' capabilities and resilience rather than focusing exclusively on deficits and risks. They should be relational, recognising the centrality of trusted relationships in supporting girls' positive development.

Given the small numbers of girls in many jurisdictions, service delivery may require creative approaches. Regional collaboration can enable the development of specialist services that would not be viable for single jurisdictions. Outreach models can bring services to girls in their communities rather than requiring them to travel to centralised locations. Digital technologies may offer opportunities for providing support and maintaining relationships across distances, though careful attention must be paid to safeguarding and accessibility.

6.5 Research and Evaluation

The evidence base on girls in conflict with law remains limited, with many findings predating recent changes in youth justice systems and the large declines in youth caseloads observed in many jurisdictions.⁷⁷ Investment in research is needed to update understanding of girls' pathways, experiences, and outcomes, and to evaluate the effectiveness of gender-responsive interventions.

Research should be participatory, involving girls with lived experience of the justice system in shaping research questions, interpreting findings, and developing recommendations. It should be intersectional, attending to diversity among girls and the ways in which multiple dimensions of identity and disadvantage shape experiences. It should be longitudinal, tracking girls' trajectories over time to understand the factors that support desistance and successful transition to adulthood.

7. CONCLUSION

The protection of girl children in conflict with law represents both a legal obligation and a moral imperative. The international human rights framework establishes clear standards for the treatment of children in justice systems, standards that apply with equal force to girls and boys. Yet the application of these standards in practice requires attention to the distinctive situation of girls their pathways to offending, shaped disproportionately by victimisation and structural disadvantage; their treatment within justice systems, influenced by gendered

attributions and persistent paternalism; and the practical challenges arising from their minority status within custodial populations.

This paper has argued that effective protection requires moving beyond gender-neutral approaches toward genuinely gender-responsive interventions that recognise the intersectional nature of girls' experiences. It has identified principles for reform and specific recommendations across legislative, policy, professional, and service domains. The implementation of these recommendations would contribute to realising the vision of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: a justice system that treats every child with dignity, that responds to children's needs rather than punishing their survival strategies, and that supports every child's potential for positive development and constructive participation in society.

The challenge is significant, but the costs of inaction are higher. When justice systems fail girls, they compound the harms those girls have already experienced, reinforcing cycles of victimisation and offending that extend across generations. When justice systems respond effectively to girls, they interrupt those cycles, providing opportunities for healing, growth, and transformation. The choice between these outcomes rests with legislators, policymakers, practitioners, and all those who shape the institutions through which society responds to children in conflict with law.

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