



Integrated Criminal Policy Approaches to Preventing Violence Against Women and Children

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Abstract

Violence against women and children is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by legal rules, institutional practices, social norms, economic inequality, and trauma-related health consequences. Evidence from global prevalence studies indicates that violence is widespread and persistent, requiring prevention strategies that extend beyond punishment alone (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). International standards increasingly frame violence against women and children as a human-rights violation and a state due-diligence obligation, emphasizing survivor safety, non-discrimination, and access to justice (United Nations General Assembly, 1993; UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW], 2017). This paper proposes an integrated criminal policy model that combines (1) effective legal frameworks and enforcement; (2) victim-centered justice and protection; (3) evidence-informed offender management and rehabilitation; and (4) long-term social prevention aligned with public-health and human-rights frameworks. Drawing on the Istanbul Convention's "4Ps" logic—prevention, protection, prosecution, and coordinated policies—this paper argues that integrated policy is most effective when criminal justice systems are linked to health, social services, education, and community-based interventions (Council of Europe, 2011). The paper concludes with actionable recommendations: strengthen risk-based protection, improve prosecution quality, scale evidence-based prevention packages (INSPIRE and RESPECT), and institutionalize coordinated multi-agency governance with measurable outcomes (WHO, 2016; WHO, 2019).

Keywords: *Violence Against Women; Violence Against Children; Criminal Policy; Prevention; Victim-Centered Justice; Human Rights; Integrated Governance*

1. Introduction

Violence against women and children remains a global challenge that tests the capacity and legitimacy of modern criminal justice systems. International frameworks define violence against women broadly, including physical, sexual, and psychological harm occurring in public or private life (United Nations General Assembly, 1993). Global health evidence indicates that approximately one in three women experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime, with intimate partner violence representing a major share of the burden (WHO, 2021). In parallel, violence against children—including physical punishment, emotional abuse, and sexual exploitation—continues across regions, with prevention requiring coordinated legal and social systems rather than isolated interventions (WHO, 2020).

Traditional “punishment-first” approaches often fail to prevent repeat victimization, address coercive control dynamics, or remove structural risk factors such as gender inequality, poverty, and weak service systems. Contemporary criminal policy scholarship emphasizes that crime control operates within broader governance conditions and social expectations, meaning policy effectiveness depends on institutional capacity, legitimacy, and coordination (Garland, 2001). For gender-based and child-directed violence, the implication is clear: criminal policy must integrate deterrence and accountability with victim protection, trauma-informed processes, and long-term prevention.

This paper advances an integrated criminal policy framework that aligns criminal justice measures with public-health prevention packages and human-rights due diligence obligations. It synthesizes evidence and standards from global organizations and leading research to propose a practical blueprint for policy design and implementation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Prevalence and patterns

Global prevalence estimates confirm that violence against women is widespread and disproportionately driven by intimate partners (WHO, 2021). Cross-national analyses show that distribution varies substantially across countries and is associated with macro-level gender inequality, norms tolerating wife-beating, and women’s access to resources—suggesting that social structure and institutions shape risk, not only individual behavior (Heise & Kotsadam, 2015). Recent global femicide briefs further underscore the lethal end of this continuum: large numbers of women and girls are killed by intimate partners or family members, indicating persistent failures in early protection and coordinated risk management (UN Women & United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2024; UNODC, 2024).

For children, global reporting emphasizes that preventing violence requires comprehensive national systems, including laws, services, and protective environments, because harm often occurs in homes and institutions where children have limited ability to seek help (WHO, 2020). UNICEF analyses similarly highlight the need for strengthened protective systems and prevention in both household and institutional settings (UNICEF, 2025).

2.2. Structural and sociological perspectives

Sociological work argues that violence cannot be treated as a marginal problem separate from governance and inequality. Violence is embedded in social relations and institutional arrangements; therefore, prevention depends on how states and communities organize social protection, enforcement legitimacy, and accountability (Walby, 2013). This aligns with criminal policy perspectives that locate “crime control” within broader shifts in social order, risk governance, and political expectations of safety (Garland, 2001).

2.3. International legal standards and victim-centered justice

International standards frame violence against women as a human-rights violation and call for state due diligence in prevention, investigation, punishment, and reparations (United Nations General Assembly, 1993). CEDAW’s General Recommendation No. 35 updates and strengthens the obligations of states to address gender-based violence through comprehensive measures, including prevention, protection, prosecution, and reparations, with attention to intersecting vulnerabilities (CEDAW, 2017). The Istanbul Convention operationalizes these obligations through enforceable standards and monitoring, emphasizing integrated policies, specialist support services, and coordinated multi-agency responses (Council of Europe, 2011).

2.4. Evidence on criminal justice interventions

Criminal justice tools—arrest policies, protection orders, prosecution strategies, and offender supervision—show mixed results unless paired with victim services and risk-based management. Meta-analytic work suggests that mandatory arrest policies do not reliably reduce repeat offending and can produce inconsistent outcomes depending on context and implementation quality (Hoppe, 2020). Evidence-based policing literature emphasizes targeted, tested strategies and continuous learning, including approaches to domestic abuse that prioritize victim safety and evidence quality (Sherman, 2013; Sherman, 2017).

3. Theoretical Framework: An Integrated Criminal Policy Model

This paper proposes an integrated criminal policy model built on four interacting pillars:

Pillar 1: Normative and legal architecture

A functioning framework requires clear criminalization of acts across the violence spectrum (physical assault, sexual violence, coercive control where applicable, child abuse), procedural protections, and enforceable protective measures. Legislative guidance from UN frameworks stresses comprehensive definitions, victim protections, and implementation mechanisms rather than symbolic criminalization alone (United Nations, 2010). The Istanbul Convention provides a structured reference point, linking legal obligations to service provision and coordination duties (Council of Europe, 2011).

Pillar 2: Victim-centered justice and protection

Victim-centered justice is not only an ethical standard but a practical requirement for prevention because reporting, cooperation, and safety planning depend on trust and support access. This requires (a) risk assessment and safety planning; (b) rapid protective orders; (c) trauma-informed interviewing and evidence collection; and (d) referral pathways to shelters, healthcare, psychosocial support, and child protection services (CEDAW, 2017; Council of Europe, 2011).

Pillar 3: Offender accountability plus behavior change

Deterrence requires credible enforcement, but long-term prevention also depends on reducing recidivism through supervision, treatment for substance misuse where relevant, and evidence-informed perpetrator programs. Policing and prosecution should be evaluated by victim safety outcomes and repeat-harm reduction, not only by case counts (Sherman, 2017). Because “one-size-fits-all” enforcement can fail, policies should prioritize high-risk cases and repeat offenders using structured professional judgment tools and multi-agency risk conferences where available.

Pillar 4: Primary prevention and structural change

Research consistently links violence risk to gender inequality and norms that tolerate abuse (Heise & Kotsadam, 2015). Therefore, criminal policy must integrate prevention packages shown to reduce violence risk factors. For women, the RESPECT framework provides seven evidence-informed strategies—relationship skills, empowerment, services, poverty reduction, safe environments, child/adolescent abuse prevention, and norm transformation (WHO, 2019; WHO, 2025). For children, INSPIRE identifies seven strategies including legal enforcement, norms change, safe environments, parenting support, income strengthening, response services, and education/life skills (WHO, 2016). These frameworks help criminal policy “reach upstream” to reduce the conditions that produce repeat violence.

4. Integrated Institutional Responses

4.1. Judicial responses

Courts play a critical role through timely protective orders, consistent sentencing proportional to harm, and victim-sensitive procedures (e.g., avoiding repeated retraumatizing testimony). Specialized domestic violence courts and trained judiciary can improve consistency and coordination, but effectiveness depends on linked services and monitoring compliance with protective orders (Council of Europe, 2011; United Nations, 2010).

4.2. Executive and policing responses

Police are often first contact. Effective models emphasize: immediate safety actions, evidence-based investigations, referral pathways, and risk-based prioritization. The evidence cautions against assuming that arrest alone prevents repeat violence; integrated approaches combining enforcement with victim advocacy and follow-up are more promising (Hoppe, 2020; Sherman, 2017).

4.3. Support systems and multi-agency coordination

A central lesson from international standards is that fragmented systems endanger victims. Coordination requires formal protocols between police, prosecution, courts, shelters, child protection services, and healthcare—supported by stable funding and shared performance indicators (Council of Europe, 2011). Recent femicide reporting highlights how many lethal cases follow prior non-lethal incidents, reinforcing the need for coordinated escalation responses (UN Women & UNODC, 2024; UNODC, 2024).

5. Challenges and Structural Barriers

Key barriers include underreporting, fear of retaliation, economic dependency, social stigma, and weak institutional capacity. Norms tolerating violence reduce reporting and also weaken enforcement legitimacy (Heise & Kotsadam, 2015; Walby, 2013). Resource constraints can produce “procedural attrition” where cases drop at every stage (policing, charging, prosecution), undermining deterrence and trust. Another barrier is inconsistent data: incomplete recording of domestic incidents and protection order breaches prevents risk targeting and evaluation (UNODC, 2024).

6. Policy Recommendations (Actionable)

1. **Adopt comprehensive legal definitions and enforceable protection mechanisms** aligned with UN legislative guidance and Istanbul Convention standards (United Nations, 2010; Council of Europe, 2011).
2. **Institutionalize risk-based, victim-centered case management** (structured risk assessments, rapid safety planning, enforcement of protection orders, child safeguarding protocols) (CEDAW, 2017).
3. **Strengthen prosecution quality and survivor support** through specialized training, evidence-led investigations, and integrated advocacy services (United Nations, 2010; Sherman, 2017).
4. **Scale primary prevention using validated frameworks:** INSPIRE for violence against children and RESPECT for violence against women (WHO, 2016; WHO, 2019; WHO, 2025).
5. **Build coordinated governance** via multi-agency protocols, shared data systems, stable funding for shelters and child protection services, and measurable outcome indicators (Council of Europe, 2011; WHO, 2020).
6. **Use femicide and serious-harm reviews** to identify systemic failures and improve early-warning interventions, especially where prior reports exist (UN Women & UNODC, 2024).

7. Conclusion

Preventing violence against women and children requires an integrated criminal policy that moves beyond isolated punitive measures. The evidence indicates that structural drivers (inequality and norms), institutional capacity, and multi-agency coordination strongly shape violence risk and the effectiveness of justice responses (Heise & Kotsadam, 2015; Walby, 2013). International standards provide a coherent

blueprint: laws and enforcement must be linked to survivor protection, specialist services, and coordinated prevention strategies (CEDAW, 2017; Council of Europe, 2011). By aligning criminal justice interventions with public-health prevention frameworks (INSPIRE and RESPECT) and implementing robust coordination and data systems, states can reduce repeat victimization, prevent escalation to lethal harm, and deliver sustainable violence prevention (WHO, 2016; WHO, 2025; UN Women & UNODC, 2024).

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