GENDER AND THE AUDIOVISUAL REPRESENTATION OF CRIMINAL LAW: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses scientific production on the representation of professional gender roles in criminal law as depicted through audiovisual media, revealing the persistence of entrenched stereotypes. Although some progress has been made, women in these roles are frequently minimised, hypersexualised, or portrayed as exceptional figures who have sacrificed their personal lives. Based on the analysis of a sample of 140 studies from the Web of Science database, the research identifies patterns that reinforce female victimisation. The study concludes that these biases undermine the credibility and authority of women in the legal and criminal justice fields, restricting their professional recognition and legitimacy.

1. Introduction

Social representations have been examined across a wide range of contexts. In this field, the theory proposed by Serge Moscovici (1985) has enabled the exploration of the processes through which groups construct and share meanings about social phenomena. These representations operate as cognitive and symbolic systems that structure collective perception and guide social practices. As Rubira-García and Puebla-Martínez (2018) explain:

> The concept of social representations refers directly to the point of union between discursive (communicative) and factual realities, between imagination and action, acting as a link between the inner and outer worlds of individuals. They therefore serve as a map for interpreting the world and for interacting with it, for instance, through communication processes, among others (Rubira-García and Puebla-Martínez, 2018, p. 148).

Today, the concept remains a key theoretical and methodological framework for analysing how social ideas and imaginaries evolve and reflect cultural, political, and media dynamics. In the case of women's professional roles, social representations in the media have played a fundamental role in understanding how social perceptions of women are constructed and reinforced. Despite the progress made in recent decades, women continue to face barriers to the recognition and validation of their diverse roles and abilities, particularly in areas where they have historically been marginalised.

This approach is particularly relevant to the study of audiovisual content, as this medium has the capacity to reach wide audiences and to influence the configuration of social representations. Research shows that women's participation in audiovisual productions affects the construction of narratives, the selection and focus of themes, and the creation of characters (Torres-Romay and Izquierdo-Castillo, 2022).

Contemporary Spanish cinema, for example, has demonstrated a growing tendency towards the creation of more independent and complex female characters who challenge dominant narratives and offer a more diverse view of women in contemporary society, moving away from androcentric models. These new representations contribute to questioning and redefining social constructions of gender, presenting more empowered models that depart from traditional stereotypes (Corral Rey and Sandulescu Budea, 2022).

Moreover, research has explored the processes of sexist socialisation and media violence that influence the formation of gender identities through audiovisual discourse, particularly among adolescents, who are at a crucial stage in identity development and are active recipients of audiovisual fiction (Martínez León, 2020). The intersection between cinema, memory, and gender studies has also gained importance in academic research, focusing on the representation of women in processes of historical memory, where films act as symbolic systems that shape the social imaginary and the collective understanding of the past (Marzorati et al., 2021).

Although previous studies have examined gender stereotypes across different areas of the audiovisual field, few have focused on the representation of professional roles in the context of criminal law. Gender perspectives in contemporary audiovisual media, particularly in the representation of women and narratives centred on crime and justice, offer fertile ground for examining portrayals of female characters in criminal, police, and judicial roles. In this domain, women have traditionally been confined to stereotypes ranging from victimisation to hypersexualisation, leaving little scope for equitable and realistic depictions of their authority and professionalism.

In recent years, however, women in the legal sphere have gained greater visibility, assuming leading roles as law enforcement officers, prosecutors, solicitors, and detectives. This development opens up new perspectives on gender constructions in audiovisual productions, which increasingly reflect social dynamics and public perceptions of gender and justice, revealing the ongoing struggle for professional respect and the confrontation with deeply rooted conventional models. A notable example is the series *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014–2020), starring Viola Davis as Annalise Keating, which portrays an African-American woman working as a criminal defence lawyer and law professor, challenging not only gender norms but also racial barriers within the American legal system. The narrative explores the complexity of balancing a highly demanding professional role with personal conflicts (Cabreja Piedra, 2019).

Similarly, in *The Good Fight* (2017–2022), female characters lead narratives that confront systemic inequalities in the legal sphere and respond to feminist principles. The protagonist, Diane Lockhart, played by Christine Baranski, embodies active resistance to legal and gender injustices (Marín Ramos, 2019). These narratives tend to reproduce persistent patterns in the representation of women, either minimising their professional abilities or, conversely, depicting them as exceptionally competent yet burdened with chaotic and sacrificial personal lives. Such portrayals reinforce the notion that female professional success inevitably comes at the expense of personal balance.

The popularity of *True Crime* productions has also been strategically exploited, exerting a notable influence on the perception of women in criminal law, both in professional roles and within criminal narratives. Their capacity to present detailed and in-depth stories, combined with high levels of artistic production, distinguishes them from more ephemeral and limited news formats that are conditioned by the immediacy of the news cycle (Garrido Genovés, 2024). This genre is not only defined by its dramatization and recounting of real events, but also contributes to the construction of stereotypes and discourses surrounding gender, crime, and justice, shaping how society perceives female participation in the criminal sphere, whether as legal professionals, victims, or perpetrators.

Understanding how the media shapes perceptions of women in professional roles within the justice system is essential for identifying narratives that perpetuate inequality and those that, conversely, create spaces for equity and diversity. Given the influence of audiovisual media in generating social references, this research contributes to a broader reflection on the need to promote representations that more accurately reflect reality and the growing participation of women in the criminal justice system. A critical review of these narratives is not only relevant from an academic standpoint, but also has implications for constructing more inclusive cultural models and fostering an informed citizenry capable of recognising and challenging hegemonic structures of representation.

2. Methodology

This study follows a mixed methodological design of meta-analysis that integrates quantitative and qualitative elements in the systematic review of available research on gender representation in contemporary audiovisual media, with particular emphasis on the impact of these narratives on women's professional roles in law and as subjects within the criminal justice system. The research adopts an interdisciplinary perspective that combines communication theories, gender studies and legal discourse analysis. Its objective is to identify patterns in the representation of female characters and to assess the extent to which these portrayals reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes in legal and criminal contexts.

As systematic review requires a rigorous process of source selection and analysis, the study was structured around three fundamental research questions:

(1) How have women's professional roles in the field of criminal law been represented in contemporary audiovisual media?

(2) What are the main narratives and gender stereotypes associated with women in the criminal justice system within audiovisual media?

(3) How have these representations evolved in recent years, and what impact do they have on the social perception of women in the field of criminal law?

These questions made it possible to summarise the state of knowledge of the phenomenon, facilitating a critical analysis of audiovisual production and its relationship with gender dynamics in the legal field. This process allowed for the identification of patterns, trends, and gaps in existing research.

The selection and analysis of studies followed the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) model, which provides a structured framework for conducting systematic reviews, ensuring transparency in the selection of sources and reducing bias in data collection (Page et al., 2021). The principles of this model were applied in the identification, screening, and inclusion of relevant studies, through a replicable search strategy that incorporated recognised databases and the use of controlled terms and Boolean combinations to optimise the precision of results.

Web of Science (WOS) was used as the main source of information, as it is a comprehensive platform that integrates databases containing bibliographic references and citations of articles published in scientific journals from the early twentieth century to the present. Its central component, the Core

Collection, encompasses specialised indexes in science, social sciences, arts and humanities, as well as conference proceedings in these fields. The platform also provides advanced tools for academic analysis and evaluation, including journal impact metrics and research trend tracking (FECYT, 2025).

In addition to the Core Collection, WOS includes other databases from which materials for this study were selected, such as the Chinese Citation Index (CCC), from which 48 works were retrieved, and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses (PQDT), with 47 publications, indicating a significant presence of doctoral and master's research. Other complementary databases contributed fewer studies: MEDLINE (6), the Korean Journal Database (KJD) (3), and SciELO (2). This selection spans a wide range of geographical, methodological and disciplinary perspectives, thereby ensuring diverse and representative coverage of the topic under examination. Nonetheless, the majority of studies were drawn from the WOS Core Collection, accounting for 89 in total (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Search by Database
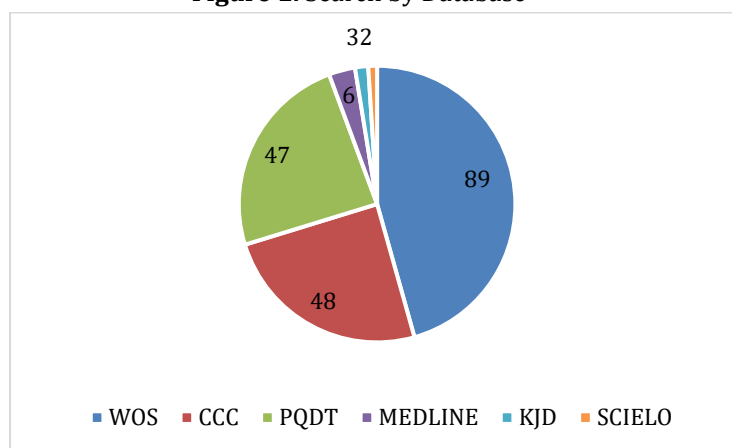
Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

The selection strategy began with the platform's own tools, such as categories, in which the Topic function was defined to explore information within specific fields, focusing on the principal concepts addressed in the articles. When searching by topic, the essential terms describing the content of the publications were included, extending beyond their titles.

Keywords related to gender, crime, media and representation were used to identify relevant studies on gender portrayals in audiovisual media and their impact on women's professional roles within criminal law.

The publications were first filtered by year, defining the period between 2014 and 2024 to encompass a representative decade marked by significant transformations in audiovisual production. This period is characterised by the incorporation of gender perspectives and the emergence of critical debates on cultural representation. Such a timeframe enables an analysis of narrative changes and their influence on the social construction of gender-related discourses.

Scientific articles, dissertations, books, and review papers were prioritised, based on criteria ensuring the relevance and quality of the information obtained. Only empirical and theoretical studies with full-text access were included, guaranteeing the completeness of the material analysed. Publications were also required to appear in indexed and peer-reviewed journals, as such sources provide higher academic reliability. Likewise, studies framed within gender perspectives, the sociology of culture or communication theories were selected in order to comprehensively address the social and cultural dynamics reflected in audiovisual narratives.

Conversely, documents classified as others, early access, editorial material and clinical trials were excluded to avoid duplication, grey literature and abstracts, as these did not provide an adequate scientific basis for analysis. After a detailed manual review of the titles and abstracts, additional studies were eliminated if their methodology did not meet the rigour required for this systematic review, for instance, those lacking methodological detail, a robust theoretical foundation, or direct relevance to the representation of women within the chosen topic.

The initial process yielded a total of 180 studies. However, after applying the aforementioned filters, the sample was reduced to 140 studies, which were deemed sufficient to ensure a high-quality corpus offering a substantial analytical contribution to the topic.

The data obtained from the selected studies were organised in a database designed to facilitate systematic analysis and to include detailed information about each study. Unique identifiers were first assigned to every document to maintain accurate control of the data and prevent duplication. The titles of the documents were recorded in both English and Spanish to allow for faster access and were classified by type, scientific article, thesis dissertation, or book chapter. Additionally, the primary source was indicated where applicable, providing a clear overview of the origin and nature of each publication.

To integrate quantitative and qualitative evidence, each study was summarised briefly, accompanied by keywords describing its research scope. Key variables such as objectives, predominant field, specific object, location of the object of study, sample, main technique, and triangulation method were also recorded. The type of media analysed was identified and classified according to format (print, television, digital, etc.), as this factor can influence how the phenomenon is presented or represented within each medium.

Furthermore, the gender of the authors was recorded, as this element can be crucial in social analyses and in research on inequality.

Regarding the academic impact of each study, metrics such as the number of citations and the disciplinary category or area of study were included. Finally, complementary observations were added, including methodological limitations, relevant analytical details and significant findings.

3. Results

3.1. Representation of Women's Professional Roles in Criminal Law within Contemporary Audiovisual Media

Through the data compilation process, a predominance of research examining the phenomenon within the media in general was observed. Although this focus was of primary interest for the present study, other materials that centred their analysis on literature and current legislation were also included (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Type of media studied
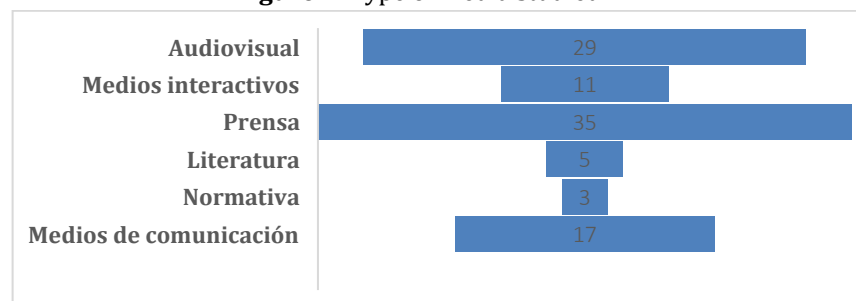
Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

A theoretical regrouping was conducted to organise the types of media examined in the research and to facilitate an understanding of the approaches applied in each category. The press was understood as encompassing newspapers, news reports and opinion columns. This medium emerged as a key source in the dissemination of media narratives, based on the number of articles in which it was analysed. In the audiovisual sphere, television, documentaries, films, and television series, including the True Crime genre, were grouped together.

The results indicate that interactive media such as social networks, podcast,s and online platforms, although influential in shaping discourses around social representations, have received comparatively less academic attention.

However, a significant number of the materials selected were limited to analysing the media in general, while other authors did not employ these terms and instead directed their research towards the theoretical field, so they were not considered in this classification.

Considering the media formats studied, the recurring themes identified in the analysed sample were examined to illustrate how they shape social representations. Titles and abstracts were used to identify the most prominent themes, revealing a predominance of works addressing violence against women and their victimisation, femicide, gender-based violence, sexual violence, and domestic violence. These

findings reflect the centrality of such issues in both academic and media discourse. The study also includes analyses of media representations of female victims, which demonstrate how the media constructs specific narratives based on the gender, race, and social class of the victims.

Although the visibility of violence against women is essential for understanding structures of inequality and seeking effective solutions, this research trend reduces women to the role of victim. Interestingly, within the selected studies, some explored female criminality and its representation in the media. However, the gendered approach adopted in these analyses tends to minimise women's agency when they commit crimes as active subjects of criminal law. Researchers note that narratives often depict female offenders as manipulated, emotionally unstable, or acting under the influence of others, rather than as autonomous individuals fully responsible for their actions.

In cases involving terrorism or ideological crimes, for example, studies show how the media frames women as victims of male manipulation, thereby stripping them of their own political or personal motivations.

As for the representation of women in professional roles within the justice system, this remains insufficiently explored by academic research. The roles of active agents such as lawyers, judges, prosecutors, and police officers revealed a clear gap in the findings compared to the focus on women's victimisation or criminalisation (see Table 1).

The image of women police officers in audiovisual media was examined in three studies, all of which identified a double standard: they must demonstrate competence in a male-dominated environment while being expected to retain traits traditionally associated with femininity, such as empathy and sensitivity. Furthermore, their participation is often confined to areas related to gender-based violence and victim protection, reinforcing the perception that their role remains secondary within the police force. Beyond this, few studies directly address the representation of women in professional roles within criminal law, and only one explicitly focuses on this subject.

Table 1. Number of studies addressing the research topic

Topics addressed	Number of studies
Women as victims (gender-based violence, femicide, sexual violence)	11
Women as offenders (female criminality, terrorism, violence)	5
Women in professional roles (police officers, judges, prosecutors, lawyers)	4
Intersectional factors (race, class, gender, age, transphobia)	3

Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

3.2. Gender Narratives and Stereotypes of Women in the Criminal Justice System and Audiovisual Media

Based on an analysis of the keywords most frequently used by researchers in the materials collected, trends were identified in the predominant discourses concerning the representation of women in the media, both within the context of crime and in the professional sphere. With the exception of three studies in which keywords were not specified, the remaining materials were examined to measure the frequency and relevance of the most commonly used terms (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Most frequently used keywords
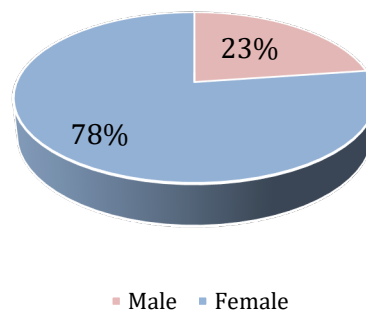

Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

It was observed that the concept of gender appeared 35 times, making it the central concept within the corpus analysed. This finding reflects a predominant focus on the intersection between criminal justice and gender studies. Likewise, terms such as *violence against women* (15 mentions), *gender violence* (9 mentions), and *violence* (6 mentions) indicate that the narratives tend to centre on female victimisation. This trend is reinforced by the presence of concepts such as *femicide*, *victimisation*, and *female victims*, suggesting that media discourse surrounding women emphasises their role as victims over other possible representations, such as legal professionals or perpetrators of crime.

Conversely, the underrepresentation of topics related to women in positions of power within the justice system, such as lawyers or women in law enforcement, reveals a bias in the way their experiences are portrayed. This limitation in representation contributes to the reinforcement of stereotypes that associate women with vulnerability and victimhood, rather than highlighting their agency and participation in the legal and criminal spheres.

A further relevant finding was the frequent appearance of the categories media (28 mentions) and media coverage (5 mentions), which underscores the significant role of the press and audiovisual production in constructing discourses about the representation of women.

Finally, the analysis of the gender of the first author in the studies reviewed reveals a greater presence of women leading research in this field. As shown in Figure 4, most of the studies were authored by female researchers, while the proportion of male authors was notably lower.

**Figure 4.** Study by first author gender criterion

■ Male ■ Female

Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

This data reflects a positive trend towards greater female participation in academic production on gender and audiovisual media, which may contribute to more critical and diverse approaches in the analysis of narratives and stereotypes present in the media. The result may also be related to a growing interest and commitment among female researchers to highlight and problematise the representation of women in the media.

However, despite this increased female presence in the authorship of research on the subject, it remains important to continue promoting equity in research leadership and recognition across related fields, where the gender gap may still be significant. The continuation of this trend could foster a transformation in the ways stereotypes and professional roles of women in contemporary audiovisual media are analysed and questioned.

3.3. Evolution of the Representation of Women's Professional Roles in Criminal Law within Contemporary Audiovisual Media

The variables *year of publication* and *number of citations received* were taken into account to identify the evolution of academic interest in the phenomenon under study (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Number of citations and publications over time
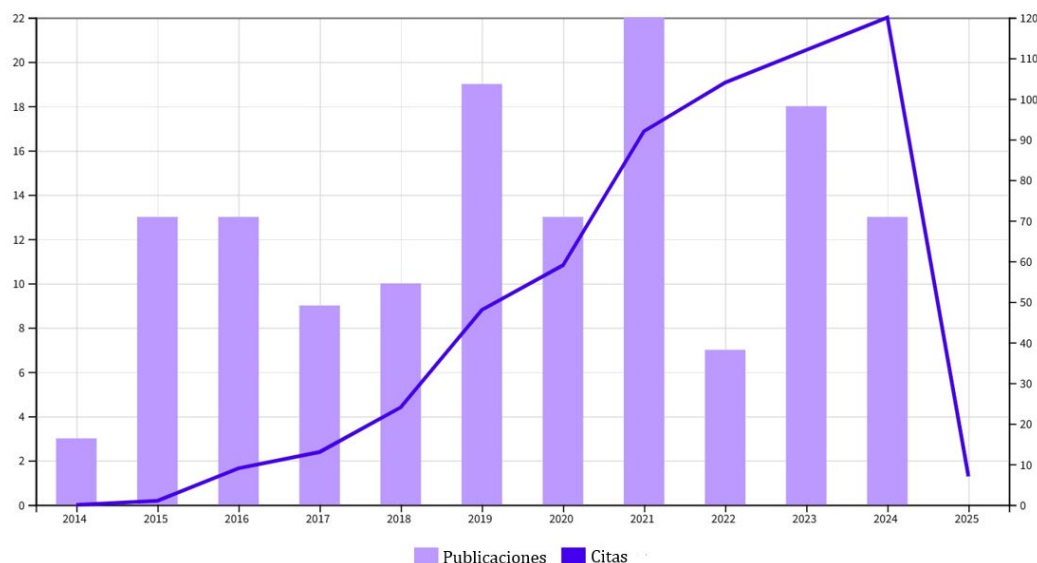
Source: Prepared by the authors based on Web of Science (FECYT, 2025).

The number of publications shows a marked increase between 2018 and 2021, suggesting growing relevance of the topic within the scientific community. These data coincide with a subsequent rise in citation rates, highlighting the impact of the subject in the academic sphere. Although the number of citations is a relevant indicator, the study was complemented by other factors to observe how research has been directed during the period analysed.

The collected materials were classified according to their stated objectives (see Figure 6). The predominant category is *Evaluate*, which represents 76% of the studies, indicating a strong focus on the verification and validation of pre-existing theoretical and methodological models. In second place is the *Explain* category, comprising 23 cases (16%), in which research aims to establish causal relationships and representation models. The least recurrent objective is *Describe*, with 8%, appearing in 11 articles, which suggests that the characterisation of specific phenomena has been a lower priority within the body of studies analysed.

Figure 6. Types of objectives by research studied
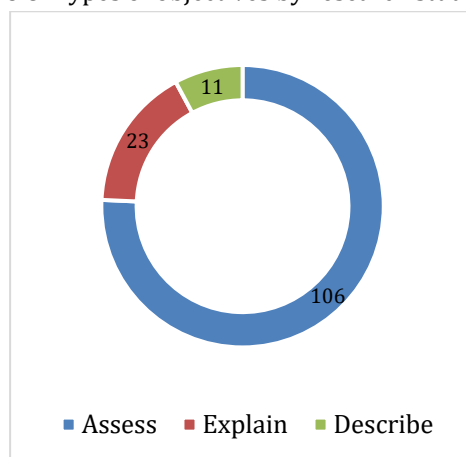
Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

However, *Evaluate* and *Explain* are the most prevalent categories, reflecting a tendency in the studies analysed towards model validation and causal analysis. These data highlight a strong interest in consolidating prior knowledge and establishing meaningful relationships within the phenomenon studied.

A closer examination of the methodological designs established by the authors reveals a predominance of the documentary approach, which encompasses 123 studies and represents the majority of the sample (see Table 2). This confirms an inclination towards the collection and analysis of

secondary sources in the research. In contrast, methodologies based on unscheduled or natural studies appear only nine times, followed by the experimental approach and action research, both represented by four studies.

Table 2. Predominant field by research studied

Predominant field	Number of studies
Documentary	123
Unprogrammed/Natural	9
Scheduled/Experimental	4
Research/Action	4

Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

An analysis of the location of the objects of study revealed a marked tendency towards research conducted in offline environments, with 131 investigations, as opposed to online studies, which represent only nine cases (see Table 3). These results demonstrate the importance that authors attach to face-to-face techniques in data collection and analysis within the subject area addressed.

Table 3. Location of Study Object by Research Studied

Location of Study Object	Number of studies
Online	9
Offline	131

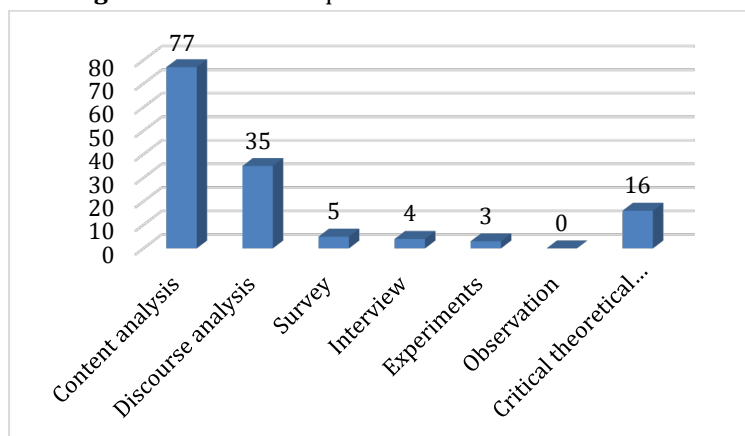Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

With regard to sampling strategies, there was an almost equal distribution between studies employing probabilistic samples and those using intentional samples, with 52 and 50 studies respectively. Meanwhile, studies based on non-probabilistic sampling accounted for 38 cases (see Figure 7). The high presence of probabilistic samples indicates an effort to ensure representativeness in the data obtained, although articles adopting a selective focus based on specific objectives and case studies also hold significant relevance.

Figure 7. Type of sample by studies examined
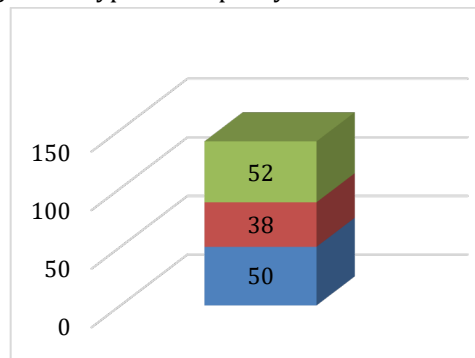
Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

In terms of the research techniques employed, content analysis emerged as the principal tool in 77 studies, followed by discourse analysis in 35 and theoretical-critical analysis in 16 (see Figure 8). Other methodologies included surveys, interviews, and experiments, while observation was not used in any of the cases. The preference for textual and theoretical analysis techniques outweighed empirical and experimental approaches.

Figure 8. Main technique used in the studies examined

Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

In terms of methodological triangulation, 40 of the studies reviewed followed a mixed approach, 36 applied methodological strategies, and 22 applied theoretical strategies (see Table 4). However, a significant number of studies did not specify the type of triangulation employed, indicating limitations in the explanation of the methodological procedures used.

Table 4. Triangulation used by studies examined

Triangulation used	Number of studies
Theoretical	22
Methodological	36
Mixed	40
NP	42

Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The representation of women's professional roles in the criminal justice system in audiovisual media significantly influences the social perception of justice system actors and dynamics. In this context, academic research has shown growing interest in analysing such representations, reflected in the notable presence of female authors among the studies reviewed. This tendency suggests an explicit commitment by female researchers to expose and challenge the gender stereotypes that permeate both media and legal discourse.

Nevertheless, greater female participation in academic production on this subject does not necessarily translate into consolidated equity in research leadership or recognition. Persistent challenges remain in the distribution of prestige and influence within the field of criminal law, underscoring the need for continued efforts to expand the presence of women in decision-making spheres and in other areas of law and criminology where the gender gap remains marked.

Regarding representation, academic production has largely focused on the victimisation of women within the criminal justice system. While this perspective is crucial, it does not capture the full complexity of their role in this field. It is necessary to broaden the analytical focus to include studies that highlight the agency of women as justice operators and as active subjects in the configuration of criminal and criminological policies. A more balanced perspective would help dismantle reductionist narratives and foster more plural and inclusive interpretations of women's participation in the justice system.

The representation of women in the media remains evidently biased, limiting both its scope and depth. In many instances, when women are portrayed in criminal contexts, the emphasis falls on transgression from a moralistic standpoint, reducing them to emotionally unstable or irrational figures rather than situating their actions within a structural or socio-political framework. Such portrayals perpetuate stereotypes that influence not only public perception but also the manner in which justice institutions address cases involving female offenders.

A similar bias is evident in the representation of women working within the criminal justice system. Audiovisual narratives frequently frame them within dichotomies that depict them as either hypersexualised or emotionally detached, presenting their professional achievements as exceptional in

an otherwise male-dominated environment. This lack of balanced representation hinders a realistic understanding of their contributions and reinforces the perception that their presence within the justice system is peripheral or anomalous.

From a methodological standpoint, research in this field has predominantly relied on theoretical and analytical approaches, with a marked preference for documentary studies and textual analysis. While these strategies are valuable for interpreting the phenomenon, their predominance has limited the development of experimental and applied research. Nevertheless, the inclusion of studies adopting dynamic methodologies, such as action research, indicates an emerging openness towards more participatory and contextualised approaches, even if these remain in the minority.

In conclusion, the analysis of academic production concerning the representation of women's professional roles in the criminal justice system underscores the need for a more balanced and diversified approach. The existing scarcity of research on this topic constrains a fair and realistic understanding of the phenomenon. It is therefore essential to continue fostering equity in both academic production and media representation, with the ultimate aim of transforming the imaginaries and discourses that shape social perceptions of the criminal justice system and the women who form part of it.

5. Acknowledgements

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