

Gender gap in rates of offending



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To address this statement and draw a conclusion it is necessary to look at changes in society over time, as women have a different role now than they used to. Even though early criminology has often been gender blind, criminologist such as Lombroso and Pollak tried to make a connection with male crime to explain and answer the question why women do not commit as much crime (Messerschmidt, 1993; Biel, 2008). It was not until feminist criminology came into force that it challenged the ‘ masculine’ nature of criminology, pointing to the repeated negligence and misrepresentation of women. As a result of such critique there was increasing attention to women and girls in criminological theory and research (Messerschmidt, 1993; Walklate, 2005). Additionally as the social role of women began to change, the view of their involvement in criminal behaviour began to change. As a consequence social, biological, economical and psychological explanations have been used to developed and explain why women commit crime and why they commit less crime than men.

A reliable research finding (Parker and Reckdenwald, 2008) is that women are seen to commit fewer and less serious offences than men, which became known as the ‘ gender gap’ in offending. Recently it has been reported the gap in violent offending has narrowed (Parker and Reckdenwald, 2008; Rennison, 2009). What is unclear is whether the reported convergence is an accurate reflection of changes in violent offending or a manipulation of the data used: official records and self-report offending data.

Determination of crime problems among women has been neglected within theoretical and empirical research compared with the crime problem among men. Women’s crime, because of its size and character was not perceived as

particularly dangerous. An important reason for this could be the fact that even in the earliest historical sources women often appeared as an object of the offence and not as its perpetrators (Messerschmidt, 1998).

According to Kilday (2005) much of the history of women remained on the margin of criminological interests. Moreover Kilday (2005) argues that studies that examine women criminals tend to emphasize so-called 'traditional' acts of women's deviance such as prostitution, while perception of women's involvement in criminal activity has been dominated by their role as a victim rather than perpetrators of crime. What is more during 18th and 19th century Britain, criminality was highly gendered and focused on class. The vast majority of women who appeared before the court were from the poor and laboring classes, and most female criminals were considered far less threatening and problematic than men. As a consequence when women could not be criminalized in their own right it was thought that they must be influenced by men or by severe personal problems such as poverty (Kilday, 2005).

One of the most commonly observed features of the criminological background is that a bulk of crime appears to be undertaken by men and boys (Messerschmidt, 1993). Fundamentally speaking major criminological theories are alarmingly and radically gender-blind. In other words when men and boys have been seen as the 'normal subjects' in criminology the girls and women have attracted the attention of criminology only as a special category that allegedly explains the gender nature of crime (Messerschmitt, 1993).

Lombroso (1911) and Bagnor (1916) (cited in Messerschmitt, 1993; Szczepanik and Pospieszny, 2007) for example argue that women commit less crime due to their different biological make-up. They argue that such a woman is nothing but a man 'backward' in the development. The main evidence for this is their lower weight, height, less body hair and fewer red blood cells. They have argued that the consequence of an organic inferiority is a natural inferiority. Lombroso (1920 cited in Klein, 1996) specifies the 'born' female offender as a woman, who is characterized by antagonism to motherhood, increased libido, tendency to immoral life, enjoys a good time, has a tendency to take part in male sport and wear more masculine clothes. They are more likely to be addicted to drugs and alcohol and display hostile behaviour. The most characteristic features of women criminals, they believed, were a bulky jaw, wild eyes, prominent cheeks, thin lips and a nap on the face (facial hair). Apart from these masculine traits female offenders also have characteristics typical for females such as cunning, cruelty, vanity and vindictiveness. What is more women's offences are thought to be influenced by male suggestion and that the female has no resistance to this. (Klein, 1996).

Bjorkqvist (1994 cited in Howitt, 2009) claims that males and females do not differ in aggressiveness. They only differ in the way in which it is expressed. He further argues that women are physically seen as the 'weaker sex' and are likely to learn different aggression strategies from those seen as the physically 'stronger sex' being men. What is more, much of the feminist literature focuses on power relationships between the sexes.

Because women have been restricted to domestic work and child-raising duties, their economic productivity was limited, which contributed to their dependent role. Consequently, because women are relegated to the household, they undergo less socialization experiences and that restricts their activities, whereas men maintain their power and dominance over economic resources and hold a position of power over women (Parker and Reckdenwald, 2008).

In addition, Messerschmitt (1986) suggests that through sex-role socialization, the family encourages its own members to adjust and conform to patriarchal ideologies. Furthermore private patriarchy accounts for the degree to which women's activities are restricted and the extent to which female work is unpaid within the family, when linking women's economic status and crime rates (Parker and Reckdenwald, 2008).

One aspect of the gender gap in crime that has attracted significant attention within the research community as well as the media is the observation that the gender gap has narrowed somewhat over time (Parker and Reckdenwald, 2008). Several explanations of this phenomenon have been offered, including legal, social and economical aspects. It was not until 1970 when argument about whether female offences were raising that it became a criminological issue. When Freda Adler (cited in Heidensohn and Gelsthorpe, 2007) argued that female crime rates had been rapidly rising between 1960s and 1970s, she claimed that not only crime rates had changed but patterns of women's offending had also changed to a more 'masculine' style. Women it appeared, were becoming more aggressive and violent, due to the growth of the modern women's movement. Adler (cited in <https://assignbuster.com/gender-gap-in-rates-of-offending/>

Heidensohn et al, 2007) put forward the theory that ‘ liberation’ in short was the ‘cause of more crime’. Granting equal rights to women had allowed them to take action in many areas of social life by giving them the chance to take on new social roles, which were previously only available exclusively to men. The women’s liberation movement brought not only economic independence but also the sense of psychological independence, with women gaining new aspirations and confidence in their own ability. These changes have created conditions conducive to the activation of women in the employment structure which has led to an increase in social status and more aggression in women. However Heidensohn et al. (2007) claims that the visible increase in female offending is that their conviction is mostly for most minor forms of offending which do not include weapons, and further argues that girls’ behaviour once seen and treated as a welfare issue, is now more criticized, criminalized and punished.

It is difficult to determine precisely the extent of crime, due to the limitation arising from the analysis made based solely on official statistical sources made up of Police Recorded Data and British Crime Survey. Determination of the size of women’s crime may pose a special kind of difficulty. Firstly, the lack of sufficient empirical data, secondly women’s’ crime is seen to be guided by its own gender-specification. The so called dark figure of crime committed by women may be caused by the fact that the women’s crime is usually crime carried out in private. Pollak (1950 cited in Messerschmidt, 1993; Klein, 1996) claim that women’s and men’s crime are likely to be equal, but because women’s biology interacts with certain social conditions their criminality is largely masked . He argues that women can be ‘ addicted’

to crime that can be easily ‘hidden’ such as shoplifting, thefts by prostitutes, abortion. Consequently the crimes women commit are more often unreported. What is more women are biologically more guileful than men and more able to conceal crime (Biel, 2008). Relatively speaking women’s offending usually take place in private (e. g. home) while mens offending usually takes place in public (e. g. Theft). Pollak (1950 cited in Messerschmidt, 1993; Klein, 1996) believed that a root cause of low rate crime among women is ‘chivalry’ in the criminal justice system. Relatively speaking women are treated more leniently than the men and Allan’s study (1987 cited in Heidensohn et al. 2007) suggests that violent women offenders received more sympathy for serious crimes than men. Also that single mothers and pregnant women were better treated than men. On the other hand Walker (2003 cited in Heidensohn et al. 2007) argues that the fact of pregnancy among female offenders does not affect the weight of the punishment and what is more, it is not seen as ethical or indeed successful. He claims many women achieved only temporary acquittal because of the fact of their pregnancy and were later punished.

The structure of the crime committed by women is a reflection of their position, and the role of social and environmental influence. Heimer, (2000) claimed that the most widely endorsed hypothesis in favour of the narrowing of the gender gap is the economical marginalization hypothesis, which states that reduction in the gender gap in crime is an effect of financial instability of women. In other words the need to escape from poverty, economical dependency on man and economic hardship. Moreover expansion in the divorce rate and illegitimacy rates in recent years which have in turn led to

more female-headed households where women have greater responsibility for their children resulted in a significant increase in economic pressure on women.

Following this Zaplin, (1998) argues that an increase in female offending is a result of increased opportunity for 'female' types of crime. The increase in the rate of female arrests for minor crimes (especially property crimes) reflects not only economic marginalization, but also an increase in opportunity for those crime categories. Relatively speaking females tend to commit crimes that involve little or no criminal skills, and now their range has expanded due to changes in merchandising and credit, which are easily accessible to women as the consumer and head of a family. As a consequence of this women have more opportunities to commit shoplifting, cheque fraud theft and welfare fraud.

Another possible explanation according to Zaplin, (1998) is that rises in female arrest is a product of changes in public sentiment and enforcement policies that bring to attention the visibility, reporting and sanctioning of female offenders. Whereas Freda Adler (Heidensohn et al. 2007) argues that female crime rates has been rapidly rising between the 1960s and 1970s , the Home Office claimed that during this time the prison population of women was so low that they thought it may be possible to end women's imprisonment by the year 2000. However along with the new century , there was a very large growth of overall imprisonment rates for women. According to the Home Office study(Hunter, Hearnden and Gyateng, 2009) the following factors had an impact on the rise of the crime rate for women: a growth in the number of women coming before the courts, a rise in the

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proportion of women getting a custodial sentence and an increase in the length of prison sentences being imposed on women. As an example they state that in 1996-7, 95 per cent of the rise was in effect more women coming before the courts. What is more the Home Office argues that now courts tend to impose harsher sentences on women for less serious crimes. The growth of the crime rate among women may also be due to the impacts of new legislation, which has created new offences, hence it may indicate that the offending rate for women is growing. Another factor influencing the growth of the offending rate in women may be seen in social changes and social attitudes towards particular offences. Szczepaniak and PospiesznyÅ, (2008) argue that since the equal opportunity for men and women came into force, women started to be seen not only as a victims of domestic violence but also as perpetrators. What is more, men are now encouraged and willing to talk about and report to the police domestic violence against themselves.

Zaplin, (1998) argues that the ability and willingness of women to commit crime is strongly pressured by social control, especially during their formative years. Females are more closely supervised and their misconduct discouraged by negative sanctions. Risk-taking behavior that is rewarded among boys is censured among girls. Careful observation of girls' companions reduces the danger for influence by delinquent peers. Even as adults, women find their freedom to explore worldly temptation constricted by social control. Also females are far more likely than males to be motivated by relationship disturbances to commit an offence and they need a higher level of provocation before turning to crime. A sense of danger and threat to

significant relationships play a greater role in female offending. If their close relationship with those who commit crime is threatened, they may be unwilling to compromise these relationship by abstaining from crime and therefore take part in criminal activities Zaplin,(1998).

Despite the fact that the gender gap of offending is narrowing and women commit much more crime than they used to, women are far less likely to be involved in serious crimes, regardless of data sources and level of involvement (Maguire et al 2007). According to the findings of the Ministry of Justice (2009: 15) females aged between 10 and 25 were less likely than males to say they had committed a serious offence (eight per cent compared with twelve per cent). They were also less likely to be classed as frequent offenders (three per cent compared with eight per cent) and less likely to be categorized as serious and frequent offenders (five per cent compared with three per cent). Further findings show that males were more than twice as likely as females to have carried a knife (five per cent compared to two per cent); more males (15 per cent) than females (10 per cent) said they had committed a violent offence (defined as robbery and assault); males were more likely than females to have handled stolen goods (22 per cent compared to 16 per cent); and over a quarter of males (26 per cent) had committed at least one of four types of anti-social behaviour, a higher proportion than females (18 per cent).

The girls and women who make up the greatest part of the criminal justice workload commit ordinary crimes – mostly minor crimes such as theft and fraud, low level drug dealing, prostitution and simple assault against their children or partners. Additionally much of the time, a large majority of these

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women are associated with men who are without good prospects, are not ambitious and who often themselves are involved in some kind of criminal acts . Consequently these men along with the children are the main focus of these womans' lives. The world of these men tends to be an extreme patriarchal one in which women are demoted to subordinate roles, exploited and treated with indifference by their male partners causing the women to lead lives that are often miserable and difficult. Routinely, it is they who are left to cope with the consequence of these men's unsuccessful escapades and the incarceration this can bring Szczepaniak and Pospieszny (2008).

Lastly we should note that most of the criminological theories were developed by men specifically to explain male involvement in criminal behaviors. As a consequence it raises the question of whether such theories are useful in explaining female crime or whether female crime can be only explained by so called gendered-specific theories. Therefore some criminologist believe that the ' traditional' theories developed to explain male crime are not well-suited to explain female crime.

Zaplin (1998) argues that their ' andocentric origin, traditional, structural and social process theories are more or less gender neutral'. As a consequence these theories may be useful in understanding overall male offending as well as overall female offending. What is more they can be also helpful in explaining why females commit less crime than men. Also he argues that many of the delicate and deep differences between male and female crime patterns may be better explained by gendered approaches.

In conclusion it is difficult to find a clear answer to female offending and to the rise of the crime rate among them. Despite many studies and research papers founded on this topic there is still no consensus among professionals. We cannot hide the fact that female criminality is a social phenomenon that has many differences compared with the crime of men. The structure of the crimes committed by women is a reflection of their position, their role in society and environmental influences. Usually women commit crimes which are associated with low risk detection or lower sentences. They do not plan the commission of the crime as male criminals do, rather they use opportunistic situations. Many women scientists involved in the studying of crime and the demoralization among women, explain it as the process of emancipation. Along with gender equality, women began to take action until which recently was reserved only for men. There are also those who blame the new fashion for being 'strong' as a reason for female involvement in crime. As the 'weaker sex' becomes old-fashioned, the so called miming of 'male behaviour' by women allow them to occupy leadership positions in the group.