

# The Problem with Female Criminality: A General Psychological Perspective

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## Facts about women in prison<sup>1</sup>

The number of women in prison has increased by almost 100% during the 1990s in the United Kingdom. More than 60% of women prisoners are mothers; almost half of these have dependent children. The offences for which women are imprisoned are less serious than those committed by men, including 149 fine defaulters in 2000. More than 32% of women in prison are first offenders compared to 14% of men.

There is a common misconception that the criminal behavior of women and the delinquent behavior of girls are not serious problems. However, violence and crime perpetrated by women have skyrocketed in the latter part of the twentieth century, and the number of female criminals appears to be growing. Research on female criminality is showing that the pace at which women are being convicted of serious offenses is increasing faster than the pace at which men are being convicted.<sup>2</sup>

Females have been "forgotten" by the criminal justice community until very recently when their escalating numbers finally made them impossible to ignore. Currently, much research on female criminality is need-

ed in order to reduce the number of females committing crimes, and to reduce the factors leading to female crime.

Historically, there has been little interest in female crime since it was not seen as a pressing social problem. Women were seen as more likely to commit minor offenses, constituted a smaller proportion of the offender population and did not commit repeated offences. In other words, female criminals were essentially seen as anomalies. In contrast, there is no shortage of research on topics such as female insanity and maternal deprivation, subjects that have been identified as having greater social relevance.

Till a few decades ago, crime was considered to be predominantly a male phenomenon, but as women increasingly join the mainstream of the society, their share in crime has increased considerably the world over...Despite the increasing rate of the involvement of females in crime, social scientists and social defence planners have not paid much heed to understand and unravel manifold trends and tone of the offences committed by women. Rather, they have been branded more often than not, this way or the other.<sup>3</sup>

However, this was not the case in Britain during the Victorian era when "Victorian sociologists and social policy-makers were much concerned with the problem of criminal women. They had good reason to be."<sup>4</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century, over 1/5 of all those convicted of crime were women compared with today's figure of 1/8. Women made up 17% of the prison population, as opposed to 4% today. Furthermore, "as a double anomaly, as someone who had violated both the legal and gender codes, and as the quintessential symbol of the problems presented by a new popular culture, the criminal woman was a titillating figure, positioned dangerously on the cusp of cultural change. Over the centuries, females who deviated from expected and traditional roles were viewed as morally corrupt, hysterical, diseased, manipulative and devious."<sup>5</sup> Female criminology, as a subject of investigation, of literature and the popular press, drew public attention to the instabilities and uncertainties of contemporary life. Like the hysterical patient, the female criminal was an enigma to herself. And like the hysterical patient, she exemplified, for popular and expert audiences, a range of issues including the so-called nature of woman. The criminal woman was identified as a problem not only due to increasing crime rates, or because she was perceived as scarier or as more disturbing than her male counterpart, but because she was considered to be at the centre of transitions that would define today's culture. A most intriguing phenomenon throughout history has been the criminal conduct of females, often perceived as the more tenderhearted gender. But very little "tender-heartedness" truly characterizes the acts of crime committed by women.

Illinois State University's Ralph Weisheit, distinguished Professor of Criminal Justice, found that "...women were becoming more stereotypically male in their reasons for murdering"<sup>6</sup>. He revealed that robbery and murders accounted for 42% of the cases in 1983, compared to 18% in 1940. Although males commit the vast majority of street violence, females seem to be catching up. "In 10 or 20 years, those statistics should be equal," predicts Dr. Coramae Ritchey Mann, Professor Emeritus of Criminal Justice at Indiana University.

The recent surge in crime among women illustrates that, in spite of the gentle nurturer stereotype, women have the capacity to be as violent as men. The difference, behavioural studies suggest, is that women need greater incentives to express that violence. Social change over the years, especially the greater gender equality, has possibly provided that incentive.

#### **Motives Behind Female Criminality:**

Women are often perceived as "soft" and vulnerable, unable to engage in crime and are usually accused of

being accomplices to crimes. In studying the aetiology of female criminality, we must always keep in mind the multiple causes and the interplay between them. The first set of factors is present in the environment and the second the personality traits of female criminals. Moreover, it is clear that their motives are as diverse as those of men and range from monetary gain, to pressure from gangs, to power, self-defence, drug addiction and a history of abuse, to sexual compulsions, mental illness, deprivation, and various forms of rivalry.

Also, some acts of violence are often a means to various ends and to acting out various roles. For example, some may pursue criminal behaviour in order to act out or defying an image constructed by society, or to develop an image that they perceive as cool or marginal. As stated above, women criminals often succumb to gang power, or follow a role model, or both as in the case of girls who belong to gangs. If they see those they respect committing a crime, they will tend to emulate. They may do it to receive and keep someone's attention or affection. Some women team up with men and get involved in their criminal activities (as accomplices or main actors) due to a form of silent emotional blackmail, or as part of their romantic involvement.

Here, it is also important to distinguish between acute and chronic offenders. Acute or one time offenders are those who commit crimes once or twice under certain circumstances. When such individuals are faced with a particular situation, they may yield to particular antisocial impulses, and, after having committed a crime, they will often be filled with remorse. A chronic offender, on the other hand, finds satisfaction and justification in his or her behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

Because of group pressures and the effect of childhood and the environment on criminality, researchers should examine aspects of juvenile delinquency which seem to be predictive of some adult criminality, in order to better devise effective intervention techniques and programs.

#### **Psychogenic Approaches to Female Crime and Delinquency:**

As stated earlier, researchers have outlined certain risk factors that contribute to women's involvement in violent crime, including unemployment, poverty, family violence, substance abuse, peer and psychological factors. These risk factors are not the sole contributors to the increase in women's crime or the perceived increase in women's violent offences, and they are by no means static.

The factors that make up family violence, such as verbal abuse, physical and/or sexual victimization by parents or other family members, parental rejection and neglect

have often been associated with the development of aggressive or deviant behaviour in children, including young women. In addition, antisocial personality disorder, conduct disorder, and depression are highly related to the appearance of angry and aggressive acts in women. These factors become most apparent during the teenage years, and remain in adulthood if not detected and treated.

In understanding the developmental issues that can lead girls to delinquency, it is also important to consider what females need for healthy development. The Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget described several stages of cognitive development and also presented an explanation of moral development. His theory suggests that child development is predictive, normative, and positive in an environment where a child's developmental needs are generally met. If the child's developmental needs are met, he/she is able to accomplish specific developmental tasks and stages.

For example:

- The need for physical safety and healthy physical development is challenged by poverty, homelessness, violence, inadequate health care, inadequate nutrition, and substance abuse;
- The need for trust, love, respect, and validation from caring adults for healthy emotional development is chal-

lenged by abandonment, family dysfunction, and poor communication;

- The need for positive female role models to develop a healthy female identity is challenged by sexist attitudes and a lack of familial support;
- The need for safety in exploring sexuality for healthy sexual development is challenged by sexual abuse, exploitation, and negative ideas about female sexuality; and
- The need to belong, to feel competent and worthy is challenged by weakened family ties, negative peer influences, academic failure, and low self-esteem.

Approaches to female criminality may fall into three main categories: the Personality Approach or the trait approaches which emphasize internal personality disposition be they biological or psychological; the Social Learning Approach which emphasizes the importance of learning and socialization; and the Biological approaches to criminal behaviour which have existed for centuries in different forms (phrenology, nervous system, genes, evolution, etc.). These theories stress the importance of physiological and inherited factors that predispose individuals to criminal behaviour. According to these theories, individuals may inherit genetic predispositions making them prone to delinquency and may in addition suffer neurological dysfunctions and psychological disorders which can play a role in criminality.



Some social and psychological theories also state that as women assert themselves in typically male ways – that is, they become aggressive, pushy, and hard-headed – criminality become “masculinized”. The opportunity theory, likewise, posits that as women attain social positions similar to men, their pattern of criminality will also become similar. For example, as the employment patterns of men and women become similar, so too will their patterns of employment related crimes.

Children with Conduct Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder with or without hyperactivity (ADHD), and/or Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD) are more predisposed to a life of criminal activity. The main symptom associated with

antisocial personality disorder is a complete disregard for the rights of others and the rules of society. Sufferers seldom feel anxiety and or guilt for their wrong-doing. They tend to be manipulative, irresponsible, and apathetic to others and usually behave in ways to seek attention and momentary pleasure.

From the social learning perspective, Bandura and Walters stress the importance of modelling in their social learning theory of delinquency. They emphasize a tendency among individuals to learn and imitate aggressive behaviour from models who were seen to be rewarded for their aggressive acts, thus explaining how children acquire many of the behaviours from their peers and parents. In other words, through observation, they learn which behaviors, even the socially inappropriate ones, achieve desirable and rewarding results without drawing negative sanctions, and model them. When inappropriate behaviors are modeled for young children, especially if they are reinforced elsewhere such as in the media or in books, they are learned and later replicated in these children's social interactions. Interventions based upon the social learning perspective are therefore rooted in efforts to prevent children's early exposure to negative role models, and the promotion of skill development in those who have been exposed.

Many women offenders have been victims of physical and sexual violence. Although that is not an excuse for their crimes, it is impossible to ignore if the aim is their productive rehabilitation and reintegration into society. In the Arab world, factors like forced or early marriage, domestic violence, and the denial of women's basic rights all play a major role in leading to delinquency and crime. Dr. Nadira Wahdan, head of the Social Planning Department at the Cairo Centre for National Planning, pointed out that a given woman often reaches a point where she cannot handle any further abuse, and reacts in an instant by killing her husband. According to her, most of these women are uneducated, live under extreme poverty and have no other means to earn a living.

It is fair to ask whether societies are generally becoming more violent, therefore accounting for the higher rate of female crimes. Since much criminal behaviour begins in childhood or adolescence as emotional and social maladjustment, the eradication of crime depends principally upon the eradication of juvenile delinquency and its root causes. Adult offenders usually start out as youths, and once they begin following an antisocial or criminal path, it is difficult to turn back. Thus, it is vital to highlight the importance of positive youth development strategies that ensure supportive and caring environments for children and adolescents, encouraging them to interact with peers who exhibit positive behaviours.

## Endnotes

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7. Mike E. Ezell and Lawrence E. Cohen (2005). *Desisting from Crime: Continuity and Change in Long-Term Crime Patterns of Serious Chronic Offenders*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

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