

Attributes and Determinants of Female Criminality¹

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Neglect of the Field

In the past, gender was often disregarded by male researchers as a variable that needs to be considered in most domains of inquiry. Hence, women represented a minor concern in the writings on criminality prior to the 1950s and the 1960s. They were studied less, appeared less often as subjects of attention and thus remained, on the whole, marginal, secondary and almost invisible. Even when they were studied, they were portrayed in distorted ways.

Many reasons could be put forward for this neglect. The first is that statistically, within the population of offenders, women constitute a much smaller proportion than male offenders. Their relatively small numbers means that complications in data collection and statistics are bound to arise because fewer subjects are available for study (Smart, 1977: 89). Second, the lack of interest in female criminality could be based on the belief that it was not dangerous to other persons, especially when compared to male criminality. Prostitution, which is the most common form of female offense, did not affect others the way that male crimes, often involving destructive behavior directed toward property and other persons, would. Third, women themselves have not been regarded as important or appropriate topics of research for male researchers. In fact, the bulk of scientific data on female offenders, to date, has been initiated, conducted and reported by female researchers, and until very recently, there have been only very few of them (Rasche, 1975: 10-15).

This lack of interest and research on women criminality has given rise to the present unsatisfactory understanding of female offenders and the offenses they commit. It has led to a situation in which women criminals are portrayed as wild and passionately possessed, an exotic image which appeals to the media, without engaging in any empirical research.

Rise of Interest in Female Criminality

The bias in the study of deviance and crime began to be subject to criticism with the rise of feminism as a social movement. Researchers became convinced that female criminality deserved more attention than it had received. In fact, from the late 1970s to date, the most notable development in theorizing about deviance has been the establishment of the foundations of what has been termed "Feminist Criminology". This comprises a diverse body of work united by the critical view that the understanding of female criminality and the role of gender in theories of deviance in general, have been ill served by both traditional and new criminologists. Reasons that lead to change in the amount and nature of attention given to female criminality included the fast increase in the number of women in prison, and the redefinition of criminological research as pertaining to both females and males.

Towards a better understanding of female criminality in order to have a better understanding of female criminality, it is necessary to know the crimes in which women engage and the extent to which women appear to be involved in criminal careers. Extensive research has been done concerning the patterns of crimes among women. Various criminologists attempted to understand certain trends in female criminality by comparing them to the patterns prevailing among males. Interesting, though diametrically opposed conclusions were reached. In what follows, the main attributes of female criminality will be reviewed.

1. In terms of the proportion of women found in the overall population of criminals, it is worth noting that in both the US and Canada, women constitute 15 percent of people arrested by the police (Belknap, 1996:54). Although males still account for the greater number of absolute offenses, the female rate of increase between 1969 and 1978 surpasses the male rate for almost every crime listed in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports.

2. With respect to the types of offences committed, statistics in the United States indicate that during the ten-year period (1969-1978), the number of women arrested for robbery increased by 62 percent, while the proportion of men arrested for the same crime rose by 32 percent; that of larceny went up by 95 percent for women and by 47 percent for men, and; that of fraud by 219 percent for women and by 63 percent for men (Adler, 1981: 3-5). Moreover, according to the arrest statistics of the Uniform Crime Report for the years 1965 and 1977, female rates rose in the majority of offense categories, with large increases occurring in the categories of larceny, liquor law violation, narcotic drug laws, and runaways. Female rates, however, declined in the categories of gambling, curfew, sex offenses and vagrancy (Steffensmeier, 1980:67-75).

Studies and research have also focused on the attributes and characteristics of the female offender. These have made reference to the age, marital status, socio-economic background and place of residence. A portrait of the typical female offender would depict her as a young (usually under age 30) undereducated poor single mother (Sarri, 1987:379). She would also be a first offender charged with shoplifting. A review of each of those attributes will be presented here below.

1. Age: Age is an important correlate because most people who break the law do so roughly between the ages of 15 and 24 years. In the case of females, while statistics for adult females show minor or no increases in criminality when compared to males, the criminality of younger females increases more rapidly than that of their male counterparts (Adler, 1981:2). In fact, among women, the young female has considerably greater powers of deception than the young male. Wolfe, Cullen and Cullen (1984)

who used police records on 2507 female arrested in a southern city in the US for the years 1969-1975, to portray the female offender, reported different findings. They recorded that only about 15 percent of the females arrested were under 18 years of age. On the other hand, while women under the age of 18 were most often involved in petty property offenses, older women were most often involved in violent offenses and in the use of alcohol and drugs. Other writers have suggested that the peak age for female criminality is higher than that for males (Smith, 1962:9). Hence, official statistics for Wales and

England show that the age distribution of known female offenders is slightly different from that for males, with a rather higher proportion in the older age groups (Mawby, 1980: 530).

2. Marital Status: Where marital status is concerned, divorced women, as one would expect, seem generally to show higher crime rates than those who are either married or single (Smith, 1962:9). It could be maintained that married life may decrease the inclination of married women to commit major crimes. Single women are faced with greater financial stresses and anxieties. The study by Wolfe, Cullen and Cullen (1984) has shown that female offenders were much less likely to be married than women in the general population. Married women contribute very little to offenses. They have financial and social stresses of a different nature; those may lead them into petty thieving and into insulting behavior and assaults against their neighbors, but not into fraud. The fact that a married woman has to compete with other women to keep her husband's affection and that she has also to take care of her children are all indications that she will not commit serious offences. Indeed, the crimes committed as a result of these stresses involve mostly stealing and disputing with neighbors. It is a common pattern among women, caught in unsatisfactory marriages to be often drawn to drink, or to resort to prostitution or to theft in an attempt to sustain married life (Heidensohn, 1985:19-20).

3. Socio-economic Background: Socio-economic background is important because it affects one's opportunities and treatment in society. Class also affects the likelihood that one will turn to crime for survival (Belknap, 1996:47). Some researchers suggested that women who break the law come from different backgrounds, though, as with male lawbreakers, those women who end

up in prison are much more likely to come from the lower socio-economic groups than from the higher ones (1985:10).

In addition, researchers discovered that female offenders are as likely as males to be motivated by economic needs. The poverty of women and their children's poverty lead them to commit property crimes and offenses connected with prostitution. Other researchers linked women crimes to their family responsibilities and their exploitation by men (Heidensohn, 1989:109).

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4. Place of Residence: A number of writers have drawn attention to the higher crime rate in urban areas due mainly to the temptations and opportunities for delinquency offered by city life. Female crimes of petty theft tend to be concentrated in cities, especially those crimes performed outside the woman's place of work or residence. Living in huge tenement blocks, where no privacy is possible compounded by quarreling children, unfaithful husbands and shared water-taps are never-failing causes of friction. In addition, prostitution is also an essentially urban form of delinquency (Smith, 1962:10).

Nature of Women's Offences

Regarding the nature of women's offenses, it has been generally acknowledged that women can be found in all criminal categories. Criminologists found that women commit a small share of all crimes: they fight, steal and kill. However, the crimes for which females are most strongly represented are prostitution, running away, larceny/theft, fraud, and forgery/counterfeiting (Belknap, 1996:49). Today, more females are being arrested for a traditionally female crime, rather than for committing a new type of crime. Heidensohn (1985) in her studies suggested that murderers or big time gangsters are scarcely found amongst the ranks of women offenders. In fact, some women can and do commit offenses of the same kind as men, but they do so in much smaller numbers, at less serious levels and far less often. Women's crimes are less serious and more rarely professional than men's. Men sometimes murder strangers, while women almost never do.

From another perspective, it has often been acknowledged that women's offenses constitute purposive and rational action. Their choices to offend and their type of offense were often made on the basis of carefully weighted considerations. For example, women commit property crimes because certain types of thefts such as shoplifting and check fraud seemed to be very easy. Even if prostitution is a distressing choice, it seems to be a reasonable decision for women whose other options are very circumscribed. It is often maintained that homicide is considered to be women's last option, and especially when no other options exist, e.g. in situations where women are battered.

Successive studies indicated that young women are continuing their involvement in gang activity (Heidensohn, 1985). Some reported that women criminals within the gang can be seen to play the subordinate and supportive female role. These roles reflect their role in the wider society. In Egypt, for example, women continue to assume a dependent and subordinate role; this situation is obvious in certain cases of prostitution where the husband directs the activities of his wife. The woman's subordination, in

complying with her man's instructions and orders in the narcotics business, is another vivid example of her dependence upon him (Ashmawi, 1981:176-187).

Women's Route into Criminality

The routes into crime have a distinct pattern among women. Hence, it has been reported that women may become criminals through a relationship with a violent man. Connections with friends and partners who use or sell drugs can be another path toward criminality for women (Heidensohn, 1994:997-1040). Women killers are far more often provoked by abuse at the hands of a male partner. It is often argued that most homicides committed by women take place within the home, the kitchen being the room most often used for such killings. A large proportion of female offenders kill as a result of domestic quarrels, which frequently occur in the kitchen while women are preparing meals. The victims of women who commit crimes of violence are usually to be found in their immediate circle: husbands, lovers or members of her family (Smith, 1962:23). Moreover, women do not seem to pose a recidivist problem and, with the exception of prostitutes, most appearances by women in court are for first offenses (Smart, 1977: 90).

Profile of The Lebanese Female Offender

The post-war period in Lebanon has witnessed a significant deterioration in the social, economic as well as in the familial domains. Strains on the family and on other forms of conventional support, exacerbated by chronic population shifts, displacement, uprootedness, unemployment and other associated tensions, have rendered groups within Lebanese society more vulnerable to forms of social disorganization and deviance. One can easily notice that Lebanon is gripped by features of ambivalence, uncertainty, risk, as well as contingency which are symptomatic of the so-called post-modern conditions. The increase in marriage breakups, the rising suicide rate among adolescents, the mounting use of drugs among university students are, to a considerable extent, symptomatic of this breakdown. However, in such discussions, the changing patterns and forms that criminality is beginning to assume are often disregarded. A brief look at the crime rate in Lebanon would be enough to obtain a reflection of the breakdown in the social fabric and the decline in normative restraints.

Among the studies concerning criminality in Lebanon during the pre and post-war era, few have shed light on the changing incidence of criminality among women. A cursory and preliminary examination reveals an increase in the general incidence of criminality among women. More revealing however is the fact that the forms and the involvement of women in crime also appear to be changing. The data from the Internal

Security Forces (Information Department), doubtful as they may be, suggest that the crime rate among women has remarkably changed over the last twenty years. A brief comparison may clarify this Issue. To begin with, the number of female criminals increased from 1074 in 1975 to 3590 women in 1995. Moreover, the criminal offenses of women have followed a distinctive pattern. While in 1974, 68 women were charged with burglary, in 1995 this figure rose to 340 women. In 1975, 47 women were arrested for embezzlement and forgery; their number increased to 337 in 1995. A relatively similar increase was noticed in other crimes such as drug trafficking, verbal and bodily assaults, and in other violations such as threatening acts. The rise in property offenses and drug trafficking among female criminals indicates that some common features exist between female criminality in Lebanon and the global trends.

It is necessary and relevant, in this regard, to mention the study conducted by Mona Fayyad pertaining to Lebanese female offenders. In a conference on "Gender and Citizenship in Lebanon" held in March 1997 at the American University of Beirut, Mona Fayyad presented her work on Gender and Punishment. In her study, she surveyed a sample of 88 female prisoners referring in particular to their educational level, marital status, age, occupation and other social correlates.

Concerning the age distribution of these female offenders, the survey showed a concentration in the older age groups. In fact, only 4.2 percent of women were in the age group 18-21 years, 31.9 percent in the age group 21-30 years, 21.2 percent in the age group 40-50 years and 4.5 percent 50 years and above. The same survey indicated that the peak age for female criminality in Lebanon is between 30 and 40 years old, where it reaches a rate of 38.3 percent.

With respect to marital status, only 8.5 percent of the prisoners are single. According to Mona Fayyad, one can assume that single females in Lebanon are less prone to be involved in crime. In fact, the survey indicated that the highest proportion of crimes among females are committed by married women; 63.8 percent of female criminals are married. It could be maintained that married women, faced with greater financial and social stresses resort to crimes in an attempt to sustain their married life. In addition, divorced women seem generally to show a relatively high crime rate reaching 17.02 percent. Finally, only 10.6 percent of female criminals are widows.

Among married women, 12.7 percent had only one child; the majority of female offenders (38.2 percent) have two children. The larger the family, the greater the responsibilities and the less likely would women

be to commit a criminal offense. One can assume that married women with only two children may find it easier to commit a criminal act than married women with four or five children do. This is confirmed by the fact that only 6.3 percent of women included in the sample have four children.

As to the educational status of incarcerated females, findings indicate that a high level of illiteracy (31.9 percent), is present among incarcerated women; 27.7 percent of the sample have received basic education; 25.6 percent reached the complementary level, and; 8.5 percent had some university education.

Concerning their previous occupation, about one third of the offenders are unemployed women playing the role of housewives. Of those who are employed, about 30 percent work as housemaids and 14.8 percent as tailors. The rest had occupations such as cooks, saleswomen and employees.

The size of the house was used by Fayyad as an indicator of the socio-economic background of women. Inmates were asked to report the number of rooms in their houses. Results revealed that about 20 percent of them lived in one-room houses. The same rate (20 percent) was consistently indicated for those living in houses with two or three rooms. In addition, a relatively higher proportion of the sample 21.3 lived in houses with four rooms, whereas only 8.5 percent had no lodging.

Conclusion

In conclusion, major advancements in the field of female criminality have been introduced by feminists. The new feminist criminology is poised to challenge the discipline's most fundamental and rigid categories. In its refusal to accept the values, experiences and behavior of the male as the standard natural order, it promises to transform the entire field of scholarship. The agenda for feminist criminology is to demonstrate to the more traditional members of the discipline that the conventional views of female deviance are inaccurate. What is required is a more nuanced approach, a theory that delineates the structural and cultural factors that account for crimes among both males and females.

Endnote

1 This article represents a synopsis of a Masters Thesis entitled "Patterns of Crimes among Lebanese Women" prepared by the author in 1998 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts to the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the American University of Beirut.