

# GENDER AND CRIME: Toward a Gendered Theory of Female Offending

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## ABSTRACT

Criminologists agree that the gender gap in crime is universal: Women are always and everywhere less likely than men to commit criminal acts. The experts disagree, however, on a number of key issues: Is the gender gap stable or variant over time and across space? If there is variance, how may it best be explained? Are the causes of female crime distinct from or similar to those of male crime? Can traditional sociological theories of crime explain female crime and the gender gap in crime? Do gender-neutral or gender-specific theories hold the most explanatory promise? In this chapter we first examine patterns of female offending and the gender gap. Second, we review the "gender equality hypothesis" as well as several recent developments in theorizing about gender differences in crime. Third, we expand on a gendered paradigm for explaining female crime first sketched elsewhere. We conclude with recommendations for future work.

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## INTRODUCTION

The principal goal of this article is to advance theory and research by reviewing selected issues in the gender and crime literature; by advancing a gendered paradigm of female offending which builds on existing theory and on the growing body of work on gender; and by proposing a series of recommendations for further research.

No single article can do justice to the vast literature on gender and crime, to both the old and especially the new writings. If criminologists were ever indifferent to female crime, it is certainly the case no longer. Although profound questions remain, more is known about gender and crime than is known about age and crime or about race and crime.

Sociologists may also welcome the solid evidence that confirms the utility of traditional sociological theories of crime in explaining crime by women as well as by men, and in explaining gender differences in crime—at least for the minor crimes that dominate both official and unofficial data on crime. Much of what we still need to learn has to do with the profound gender differences in patterns of serious offending, rather than the less consequential differences in patterns of minor crime.

We first assess similarities and differences between female and male patterns of offending. Next we briefly review explanations of those patterns and of the gender gap, particularly the so-called “gender equality” hypothesis that gender differences in crime converge as male and female roles become more similar. We then seek to advance theory and research in the field by expanding on a “gendered” paradigm begun elsewhere (Steffensmeier & Allan 1995) that can illuminate the critical relationship between gender and crime and by setting forth a number of recommendations for future work.

## FEMALE AND MALE PATTERNS OF OFFENDING

Patterns of offending by men and by women are notable both for their similarities and for their differences. Both men and women are more heavily involved in minor property and substance abuse offenses than in serious crimes like robbery or murder. However, men offend at much higher rates than women for all crime categories except prostitution. This gender gap in crime is greatest for serious crime and least for mild forms of lawbreaking such as minor property crimes.

Many sources provide data that permit comparison of male and female offending. We review FBI arrest statistics (US Department of Justice 1990) for men and women, and we draw also upon offender information from the National Crime Victimization Survey, and on findings from surveys on self-reported crime, from studies of criminal careers and delinquent gangs, and from case studies that provide a wealth of qualitative data on the differing contexts of male and female offending.

Table 1 summarizes a variety of information drawn from male and female arrest data for all FBI offense categories except rape (a male crime) and runaway and curfew (juvenile offenses): trends in male and female arrests rates per 100,000 population (columns 1–6), trends in the female percent of arrests (columns 7–9), and the offending profile of males and females (columns

**Table 1** Male and female arrest rates/100,000, male and female arrest profiles, and female percentage of arrests. (1960–1990, uniform crime reports)

Offenses	Male Rates		Female Rates		Offender-Profile Percentage						Female Percentage (of arrests)		
							Males		Females				
	1960	1975	1990	1960	1975	1990	1960	1990	1960	1990	1960	1975	1990
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
Against Persons													
Homicide	9	16	16	2	3	2	.1	.2	.2	.1	17	14	11
Aggravated assault	101	200	317	16	28	50	1	3	2	2	14	13	13
Weapons	69	137	165	4	11	14	1	2	.5	.7	4	8	7
Simple assault	265	354	662	29	54	129	4	6	4	5	10	13	15
Major Property													
Robbery	65	131	124	4	10	12	1	1	.5	.5	5	7	8
Burglary	274	477	319	9	27	32	4	3	1	1	3	5	8
Stolen Property	21	103	121	2	12	17	.3	1	.2	.5	8	10	11
Minor Property													
Larceny-Theft	391	749	859	74	321	402	6	10	9	20	17	30	30
Fraud	70	114	157	12	59	133	1	2	2	7	15	34	43
Forgery	44	46	51	8	18	28	.5	.5	1	1	16	28	34
Embezzlement	—	7	8	—	3	5	—	.2	—	.1	—	28	37
Melicious Mischief													
Auto theft	121	128	158	5	9	18	2	1	1	1	4	7	9
Vandalism	—	187	224	—	16	28	—	2	—	1	—	8	10
Arson	—	15	13	—	2	2	—	.3	—	.1	—	11	14
Drinking/Drugs													
Public drunkenness	2573	1201	624	212	87	71	36	8	25	4	8	7	9
DUI	344	971	1193	21	81	176	5	15	3	9	6	5	11
Liquor laws	183	276	428	28	43	102	3	5	4	5	13	14	17
Drug abuse	49	523	815	8	79	166	1	7	1	6	15	13	14
Sex/Sex Related													
Prostitution	15	18	30	37	45	62	.2	.4	4	3	73	73	65
Sex offenses	81	55	78	17	5	7	1	1	2	.3	17	8	8
Disorderly conduct	749	597	499	115	116	119	11	5	14	6	13	17	18
Vagrancy	265	45	26	23	7	4	4	.3	3	.2	8	14	12
Suspicion	222	31	13	28	5	3	3	.1	3	.1	11	13	15
Miscellaneous													
Against family	90	57	51	8	7	12	1	.5	1	.5	8	10	16
Gambling	202	60	14	19	6	2	3	.2	2	.2	8	9	15
Other Exc. traffic	871	1139	2109	150	197	430	13	23	19	20	15	15	15
Total	7070	7850	9211	831	1383	2122					11	15	19

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10–13). All calculations in Table 1 adjust for the sex composition in the population as a whole and are based on ages 10–64 (i.e. the population most at risk for criminal behavior).

### *Arrest Rates, 1960, 1975, 1990*

For both males and females, arrest rates are higher for less serious offenses, and both male and female rates trended upward during both periods (1960–1975, 1975–1990) for many offense categories. Large increases are found mainly for petty property crimes like larceny and fraud, for substance abuse (DUI, drugs, and liquor law violations), and for assault. A number of the public order offense categories trended downward, especially public drunkenness, gambling, and many of the sex-related offenses. The similarity in male and female trends suggests that the rates of both sexes are influenced by similar social and legal forces, independent of any condition unique to women or men.

### *Arrest Profiles*

The similarities are even more evident in the profiles of male and female arrest patterns displayed in columns 10–13. These profiles reflect the percentage of total male and total female arrests represented by each crime category for 1960 and 1990. The homicide figures of 0.2 for men in 1990 and 0.1 for women mean, respectively, that only two tenths of 1% of all male arrests were for homicide, and only one tenth of 1% of all female arrests were for homicide.

For both men and women, the three most common arrest categories in 1990 are DUI, larceny-theft, and “other except traffic”—a residual category that includes mostly criminal mischief, public disorder, local ordinance violations, and assorted minor crimes. Together, these three offense categories account for 48% of all male arrests and 49% of all female arrests. Note, however, that larceny arrests are the most numerous category (20% in 1990) for females; but that for males, DUI arrests are more important (15%). Arrests for murder, arson, and embezzlement are relatively rare for men and women alike, while arrests for offenses such as liquor law violations (mostly underage drinking), simple assault, and disorderly conduct represent “middling ranks” for both sexes.

The most important gender differences in arrest profiles involve the proportionately greater female involvement in minor property crimes (collectively, about 28% of female arrests in 1990, compared to 13% of male arrests), and the relatively greater involvement of males in crimes against persons and major property crimes (17% of male arrests, but only 11% of female arrests). Ironically, men and women were slightly closer in their profiles in these more “masculine” categories in 1960, when they represented 11.4% of male arrests and 8.4% of female arrests.

### *Female Percentage of Arrests*

Although some authors profess to see major changes over time in the female percentage of arrests (e.g. Adler 1975, Simon 1975), the numbers for 1960, 1975, and 1990 are perhaps more remarkable for their similarity than for their differences. For all three periods, the female share of arrests for most categories was 15% or less and was typically smallest for the most serious offenses. Major change is found principally for the female share of arrests for minor property crimes such as larceny and fraud, which averaged between 15% and 17% in 1960, but jumped to between 30% and 43% by 1990.

### *National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)*

The relatively low female participation in serious offending is corroborated by data from the NCVS (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1992). In NCVS interviews, victims are asked the sex of offender, and totals turn out to be quite close to those found in UCR data. In 1990, for example, women are reported to be responsible for about 7% of robberies, 12% of aggravated assaults, 15% of simple assaults, 5% of burglaries, and 5% of motor vehicle thefts reported by victims. These percentages have held unchanged since the NCVS began in the mid-1970s.

### *Self-Report Studies*

The pattern of a higher female share of offending for mild forms of lawbreaking and a much lower share for serious offenses is confirmed by the numerous surveys in which persons (generally juveniles) have been asked to report on their own offenses (Canter 1982). This holds both for prevalence of offending (the percent of the male and female samples that report any offending) and especially for the frequency of offending (the number of crimes an active offender commits in a given period). However, gender differences are less for self-report data than for official data (Jensen & Eve 1976, Smith & Visser 1980), and gender differences are smaller still for self-report prevalence data on minor offenses such as shoplifting and minor drug use (Canter 1982).

### *Gang Participation*

Girls have long been members of gangs (Thrasher 1927), and some girls today continue to solve their problems of gender, race, and class through gang membership. At issue is not their presence but the extent and form of their participation. Early studies, based on information from male gang informants, depicted female gang members as playing secondary roles as cheerleaders or camp followers, and ignored girls' occasionally violent behavior.

Recent studies, which rely more on female gang informants, indicate that girls' roles in gangs have been considerably more varied than early stereotypes

would have it. Although female gang members continue to be dependent on male gangs, the girls' status is determined as much or even more so by her female peers (Campbell 1984). Also, relative to the past, girls in gangs appear to be fighting in more arenas and even using many of the same weapons as males (Quicker 1974), and the gang context may be an important source of initiating females into patterns of violent offending (Fagan 1990). The aggressive rhetoric of some female gang members notwithstanding, their actual behavior continues to display considerable deference to male gang members, avoidance of excessive violence, and adherence to traditional gender-scripted behaviors (Campbell 1990, Chesney-Lind & Sheldon 1992, Swart 1991). Ganging is still a predominantly male phenomenon (roughly 90%). The most common form of female gang involvement has remained as auxiliaries or branches of male gangs (Miller 1980, Swart 1991), and girls are excluded from most of the economic criminal activity (Bowker et al 1980).

### *Criminal Careers*

The study of individual careers in crime—the longitudinal sequence of crimes committed by an individual offender—has become an increasing focus of criminology. The research comparing male and female criminal careers is limited to violent career offenders and has found substantial gender variation: (i) Although violent offenses comprise only a small percentage of all the offenses committed by offenders in any population, females participate in substantially less violent crime than males during the course of their criminal careers; (ii) the careers of violent females both begin and peak a little earlier than those of males; (iii) females are far less likely than males to repeat their violent offenses; and (iv) females are far more likely to desist from further violence (see reviews in Denno 1994, Kruttschnitt 1994, Weiner 1989).

Case studies and interviews, even with serious female offenders, indicate no strong commitment to criminal behavior (Arnold 1989, Bottcher 1986, Miller 1986). This finding stands in sharp contrast to the commitment and self-identification with crime and the criminal lifestyle that is often found among male offenders (Sutherland 1937, Prus & Sharper 1977, Steffensmeier 1986, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania 1991).

## APPLYING TRADITIONAL THEORY TO THE EXPLANATION OF GENDERED CRIME PATTERNS

A long-standing issue concerns whether female crime can be explained by theories developed mainly by male criminologists to explain male crime. Do the macro social conditions producing male crime also produce female crime? Are the pathways or processes leading to crime similar or distinct across the

sexes? A variety of evidence suggests that there is considerable overlap in the “causes” of male and female crime, and that both traditional and more recent theoretical perspectives can help explain both female offending patterns and gender differences for less serious crime. The explanation of serious female crime and of gender differences in serious crime is more problematic.

### *Similarity in Social Backgrounds*

The social backgrounds of female offenders tend to be quite similar to those of male offenders (see reviews in Chesney-Lind & Shelden 1994, Denno 1994, Steffensmeier & Allan 1995). Like male offenders, female offenders (especially the more serious ones) are typically of low socioeconomic status, poorly educated, under- or unemployed, and disproportionately from minority groups. The main difference in their social profile is the greater presence of dependent children among female offenders.

### *Regression of Female Rates on Male Rates*

The extent to which male rates can predict female rates provides indirect evidence of similarity in the etiology of female and male crime (Steffensmeier & Allan 1988, Steffensmeier et al 1989). Groups or societies that have high male rates of crime also have high female rates, whereas groups or societies that have low male rates also have low female rates. Over time, when the male rate rises, declines, or holds steady across a specific historical period, the female rate behaves in a similar fashion. Statistically, when the female rates for a given group are regressed on the male rates for the same group, across time or across crime categories, the results for most comparisons do not differ significantly from a prediction of no difference (Steffensmeier & Allan 1988, Steffensmeier & Streifel 1992). Such findings suggest that female rates respond to the same social and legal forces as male rates, independent of any condition unique to women or to men (Bortitch & Hagan 1990, Steffensmeier 1980, Steffensmeier & Streifel 1992).

### *Aggregate Analysis*

In an aggregate study of structural correlates of female crime rates, Steffensmeier & Streifel (1993) report findings similar to those for comparable aggregate studies of male rates. For example, rates of female crime tend to be higher in cities with high levels of economic inequality and poverty. There is a major need for further macro-aggregate studies of female offending.

### *Theory Testing with Self-Report Data*

Theory testing with individual-level self-report data has identified causal factors for female offending that are quite consistent with those suggested by traditional

theories of crime such as anomie, social control, and differential association (Akers et al 1979, Giordano et al 1986, Hagan 1989, Jensen & Eve 1976, Paternoster & Triplett 1988, Rankin 1980, Smith 1979, Smith & Paternoster 1987, Tittle 1980). Measures of bonds, associations, learning, parental controls, perceptions of risk, and so forth have comparable effects across the genders.

However, such findings apply mainly to minor offending; available self-report data sets do not lend themselves to the study of serious offending—either male or female—due to limited sample size, question content and format, and other problems. Aggregate methodology is perhaps even less adapted to the study of gender differences in criminal career paths and in the context of offending.

**SHORTCOMINGS OF TRADITIONAL THEORIES** The traditional theories are helpful in explaining overall patterns of female and male offending, and they shed some light on why female levels of offending are lower than for males. These approaches are less enlightening when seeking answers for a variety of both subtle and profound differences in female and male offending patterns.

For example:

Why are serious crimes against property and against persons so much less a feature of female offending? Male criminal participation in serious crime greatly exceeds female involvement, regardless of data source, crime type, level of involvement, or measure of participation (Kruttschnitt 1994, Steffensmeier 1983, Steffensmeier & Allan 1995). Women are far less likely to be involved in serious offenses, and the monetary value of female thefts, property damage, drugs, injuries, is typically smaller than that for similar offenses committed by men.

Why are female offenders less likely to participate in or lead criminal groups? Females are also more likely than males to be solo perpetrators, or to be part of small, relatively nonpermanent crime groups. When female offenders are involved with others, particularly in more lucrative thefts or other criminal enterprises, they typically act as accomplices to males who both organize and lead the execution of the crime (see Steffensmeier 1983, for a review). Perhaps the most significant gender difference is the overwhelming dominance of males in more organized and highly lucrative crimes, whether based in the underworld or the “upperworld” (Steffensmeier 1983, Daly 1989, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania 1991).

Why do women seem to need a higher level of provocation before turning to crime, especially serious crime? For example, in comparison to male offenders, female offenders are more likely to also be victims as children or adults (Chesney-Lind & Shelden 1992, Daly 1994, Gilfus 1992, Widom 1989). In her analysis of the Philadelphia cohort data, Denno (1994) reports that,

although many factors are as predictive of female as male criminality, female offenders are more likely to have had records of neurological and other biological or psychological abnormalities. Likewise, Daly (1994) reports that female offenders (in comparison to male offenders) in a New Haven felony court had greater childhood and adult exposure to abuse, but that the female felons were nevertheless more conventional than the males in having greater responsibilities for children, commitment to education, and legitimate sources of income.

Why does female offending often involve relational concerns? Situational pressures such as threatened loss of valued relationships may play a greater role in female offending. Although the saying, "She did it all for love" is sometimes overlaid in reference to female criminality, the role of men in initiating women into crime—especially serious crime—is a consistent finding across research (Gilfus 1992, Miller 1986, Pettitway 1987, Steffensmeier 1983, Steffensmeier & Terry 1986). Such findings also suggest that women are not uniformly less amenable to risk, but rather that their risk-taking is less violative of the law and more protective of relationships and emotional commitments.

These and other questions often involve subtle issues of context that are not addressed by most traditional and contemporary theories, and which tend to be invisible (or nearly so) to quantitative analyses. Fortunately, as we discuss later, contextual issues are illuminated by a wealth of qualitative information to be found both in the traditional criminological literature (Elliott 1952, Reitman 1937) and in the profusion of qualitative research produced by feminist criminologists in recent years.

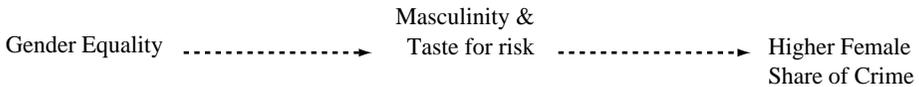
## THE GENDER GAP AND CRIME

The gender gap in crime—the low level of female offending in relation to that of males—is universally recognized by criminologists. Almost as universal is the assumption that the gender gap varies significantly by age, race, geographic area, and time. In fact, Sutherland and other early criminologists cited variations in the ratio of female to male arrests to demonstrate the superiority of sociological explanations of crime over biological explanations (see the review in Steffensmeier & Clark 1980): If the gender gap had a biological basis, it would not vary, as it does, across time and space.

### *The Gender Equality Hypothesis*

It also was assumed that variations could be best explained by differences in gender equality over time and among social groups (Sutherland 1924, see review in Steffensmeier & Clark 1980b). This interpretation is depicted in Figure 1.

Specifically, the assertion was that the gender gap in crime is less in social settings where female roles and statuses presumably differ less from those of



*Figure 1* Gender equality and crime.

men: that is, in developed nations, compared to developing countries; in urban, compared to rural settings; among blacks, compared to whites; among people of older ages, compared to younger; and in time of war, compared to peacetime.

This early explication of the gender equality and crime hypothesis became the standard sociological explanation for the gender gap in crime, but it never attracted widespread public attention until the 1970s when several feminist criminologists suggested that increases in the female share of arrests could be attributed to gains in gender equality as a result of the women's movement (Adler 1975, Simon 1975). The media enthusiastically embraced this interpretation of the "dark side" of female liberation.

The gender equality hypothesis continues to influence theories of gender and crime, as exemplified in the power-control approach developed by Hagan and his colleagues (1993). According to power-control theory, the gender gap in "common delinquency" is minimized for girls raised in "egalitarian" families (families headed by women and families in which the mother works in a position of authority equal to or greater than that of the father). As with the earliest statements of the gender-equality hypothesis, greater gender equality is assumed to lead to higher rates of female crime (although the precise mechanisms are more complex).

Recent challenges to the assumptions of the gender equality hypothesis have questioned (i) whether the gender gap in crime varies as much as previously believed; (ii) whether women in fact have experienced greater social equality in the specified groups and times; (iii) whether the gender gap in crime is in fact less in the specified groups and times; and (iv) whether the gender equality approach fares better than alternative hypotheses for explaining whatever time-space variations in the gender gap do in fact exist.

The evidence for time-space variations is meager and often statistically flawed. Variation in the gender gap is sometimes found for this or that offense, mainly for less serious forms of lawbreaking. But across most offenses, the more systematic analyses of self-report data and official arrest statistics reveal that the gender effect is far more stable than variant across race, age, social class, rural-urban comparisons, and in comparisons of less-developed and developed nations (Cantor 1982, Steffensmeier & Allan 1988, Tittle 1980, Steffensmeier et al 1989). Even the apparent narrowing of the gender gap during war largely disappears when controls are included for the wartime absence of young men most at risk for crime (Steffensmeier et al 1980). Further, structural factors

other than gender equality appear to better explain those instances where the gender gap is not stable across societies or population subgroups.

### *Recent Trends in Female Crime and the Women's Movement*

It also is questionable whether the women's movement has led to a significant narrowing of the gender gap in crime over recent decades. Looking again at UCR data on the female percentage of arrests for the periods 1960, 1975, and 1990 (columns 7–9 in Table 1), significant increases across both periods are found mainly for minor property crimes (larceny, fraud, forgery, and embezzlement); women averaged around 15% in 1960 and between 30% to 40% of arrestees for these crimes in 1990. The largest increases (12% to 19%) in the female share of arrests for these categories occurred between 1960 and 1975, before the women's movement had gained much momentum. Consistent but small increases (1% to 3% for each period) are found for major property crimes and malicious mischief offenses. However, no clear trends are found for the categories of crimes against persons, drinking and drugs, and the sex-related crimes. For all three periods, the female share of arrests for most offense categories was 15% or less, and was typically smallest for the most serious offenses.

It is plausible to argue that greater freedom has increased female participation in the public sphere (work, shopping, banking, driving, and the like), and this could help account for some of the increases in the female share of arrests for petty property offenses like larceny (shoplifting, employee theft), fraud (misuse of credit cards), or forgery (writing bad checks). But do such behaviors as shopping, banking, or working in shops really reflect female emancipation? Such offense categories do not reflect white collar crimes, as Simon argued, but petty offenses committed by economically marginal women (Chesney-Lind 1986, Daly 1989, Steffensmeier 1980, 1993).

### *Alternative Explanations for Gender Gap Differences and Trends*

Of course, for many offense categories, trends in the female share of offending are inconsistent with the gender equality hypothesis. However, a variety of alternative explanations provide more plausible and more parsimonious accounts for those increases in the female percent of arrests that did occur.

**GENDER INEQUALITY** Some feminists (and others) espouse a position diametrically opposed to that of Adler & Simon (Chesney-Lind 1989, Daly 1989, Miller 1986, Richie 1995). They point to the peculiarity of considering "a hypothesis that assumed improving girls' and women's economic conditions would lead to an increase in female crime when almost all the existing

criminological literature stresses the role played by discrimination and poverty (and unemployment or underemployment) in the creation of crime” (Chesney-Lind & Shelden 1992:77; see also Steffensmeier 1980).

Patriarchal power relations shape gender differences in crime, pushing women into crime through victimization, role entrapment, economic marginality, and survival needs. Nowhere is the gender ratio more skewed than in the great disparity of males as offenders and females as victims of sexual and domestic abuse. The logic of the gender inequality (or marginality) approach, depicted in Figure 2, suggests that greater gender equality would lead to a lower female share of crime.

The role of inequality may be seen in career paths of female teens who drift into criminality as a consequence of running away from sexual and physical abuse at home. The struggle to survive on the streets may then lead to other status offenses and crimes (Gilfus 1992, Chesney-Lind 1989), including prostitution and drug dealing (English 1993). Especially when drug abuse is involved, other criminal involvements are likely to escalate (Anglin & Hser 1987, Inciardi et al 1993). Other feminist researchers have chronicled how female vulnerability to male violence may drive women into illegal activities (Miller 1986, Richie 1995). Despite histories of victimization or economic hardship, many of these women display considerable innovation and independence in their “survival strategies” (Mann 1984).

The gender inequality argument is also supported by Steffensmeier (1993), who points out that increases in petty property crimes are less likely to result from workforce gains than from the economic pressures on women that have been aggravated by heightened rates of divorce, illegitimacy, and female-headed households, coupled with greater responsibility for children. In addition to increased economic pressures, Steffensmeier (1993) goes on to enumerate several other factors that can help explain increases in the female percentage of arrests for property offenses, including the increased formalization of law enforcement, increased opportunities for “female” types of crime, and trends in female drug dependency.

INCREASED FORMALIZATION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT Steffensmeier (1993) enumerates a number of other alternative explanations for increases in the female

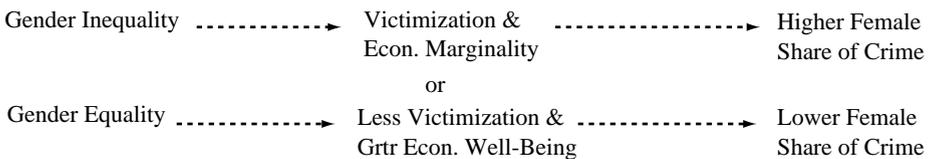


Figure 2 Gender inequality and crime.

percent of arrest for some categories. For example, some increases in female arrests may have been an artifact of improved records processing that provided more complete tabulation of female arrests for some categories of arrest, particularly during the 1960s.

**INCREASED OPPORTUNITIES FOR "FEMALE" TYPES OF CRIME** The increased percentage of arrests of women for petty property crimes reflects not only economic marginalization, but also an increase in opportunities for these crime categories (Steffensmeier 1993). Largely excluded from lucrative forms of crime (Steffensmeier 1983), women have increased their share of arrests for economically motivated crimes largely in those categories that (i) require little or no criminal "skill"; (ii) have expanded due to changes in merchandising and credit; (iii) are easily accessible to women in their roles as consumers and heads of families. Together, growing economic adversity among large subgroups of women has increased the pressure to commit consumer-based crimes, which are likewise expanding, such as shoplifting, check fraud, theft of services, and welfare fraud.

**TRENDS IN FEMALE DRUG DEPENDENCY** Rising levels of illicit drug use by women appear to have had a major impact on female crime trends, even though female drug arrests have not outpaced male arrests since 1960. Drug dependency amplifies income-generating crimes of both sexes, but more so for women because they face greater constraints against crime and need a greater motivational push to deviate (Anglin et al 1987, Inciardi et al 1993). Female involvement in burglary and robbery, in particular, typically occurs after addiction and is likely to be abandoned when drug use ceases (Anglin et al 1987).

Drug use is also more likely to initiate females into the underworld and criminal subcultures and to connect them to drug-dependent males who use them as crime accomplices or exploit them as "old ladies" to support their addiction (Miller 1986, Pettitway 1987, Steffensmeier & Terry 1986). The drug trends also help explain the small rise in the female percentage of incarcerated felons, from about 3% in the 1960s to 6% in the 1990s (but compare to 6% in the 1920s).

### *Other Criticisms of the Gender Equality Hypothesis*

Several criticisms of the gender equality hypothesis have focused on power-control theory, on contradictory evidence such as the traditional gender-role definitions commonly found among female offenders, or on the manner in which gender gap trends in specific crimes are at odds with the gender equality hypothesis. Perhaps the most telling criticism is that theory development has been suppressed by the popularity of the gender equality hypothesis.

**CRITICISMS OF POWER CONTROL** The power-control version of the gender equality approach has been challenged for its uncritical acceptance of the gender

equality hypothesis (Morash & Chesney-Lind 1991) and for adding little or nothing to the explanatory power of control theory (Jensen 1993). Empirical challenges have come from several studies that report findings at odds with power-control assertions (Jensen 1993, Morash & Chesney-Lind 1991, Singer & Levine 1988, but see Grasmick, Bursik & Sims 1993). However, these studies employed somewhat different operationalizations of the independent variables.

**TRADITIONAL GENDER-ROLE DEFINITIONS OF FEMALE OFFENDERS** The gender equality hypothesis is further undermined by the prevalence of traditional gender-role definitions assumed by most male and female offenders (Botchler 1995). A few studies report a relationship between nontraditional or masculine gender role attitudes and female delinquency on a given item but not on other items (Heimer 1995, Shover et al 1979, Simpson & Ellis 1995). The bulk of studies, however, report that traditional rather than nontraditional views are associated with greater delinquency (see reviews in Chesney-Lind & Shelden 1992, Pollock-Byrne 1990, Steffensmeier & Allan 1995).

**HOMICIDE AND BURGLARY TRENDS** The basic irrelevance of the gender equality hypothesis to trends in the female share of arrests can be seen by looking in greater depth at the patterns for homicide (for which the female percent of arrests declined) and burglary (for which the female percent of arrests increased). In the case of murder, the decline in the female share of arrests (from 17% in 1960 to 10% in 1990) is accounted for not by any sharp drop in female arrests for murder, but by the great increases in male arrests for felony murders connected with the drug trade and the increased availability of guns.

Similarly, much of the increase (from 5% to 8%) in the female share of arrests for burglary between 1975 and 1990 resulted from drops in recorded male arrests, partly because of a shift from burglary to drug dealing on the part of male offenders, and partly because of increased police compliance with UCR reporting recommendations that theft from cars be reported as larceny rather than burglary (Steffensmeier 1993).

**SUPPRESSION OF THEORY DEVELOPMENT** Over-reliance on the gender equality hypothesis has retarded sociological efforts to develop a multivariate framework for explain gender differences in crime. In a sense, reliance on the gender equality hypothesis can be seen as another example of seeking unique explanations where female crime is at issue.

### *Application of Traditional Theory to Explanation of the Gender Gap*

It is perhaps premature to abandon traditional criminological theories without fully exploiting their insights, which would suggest that females offend less

than males: because they are less subject than males to the cultural emphasis on material success (anomie); because they are less exposed to influence from delinquent peers (differential association and/or social learning); because they have stronger social bonds and are subjected to greater supervision (social control); and because they are less likely to become involved in gangs (cultural transmission).

Findings from a number of self-report studies support the ability of traditional criminological theories to partially account for the gender gap in crime. These studies show that the relationship between gender and delinquency is significantly reduced when controls are included for friends who support delinquency (Simons et al 1980), parental controls (Hagan 1989), and social bonds (Jensen & Eve 1976). However, as with power-control theory (but framed explicitly in terms of "common delinquency"), the significance of the traditional theories for explaining the gender gap is limited by the fact that these studies have been confined to minor (mainly male) delinquencies. As already noted, they also lack sensitivity to the manner in which the criminal behavior of women differs from that of men in terms of paths to crime (e.g. prior experience as victims) and in terms of context.

The critical need is for an approach that can explain not just minor but serious female offending, and one that can explain the gender gap not just where it is least, but where it is greatest. Gender differences are most robust in both the prevalence and incidence of serious offending, yet robust theoretical tests for these differences are notable for their absence. Until such tests can be carried out, the relevance of traditional theories will remain unknown with regard to that domain of criminality where gender differences are greatest and where statistical variation is sufficient for theory testing.

## TOWARD A GENDERED THEORY

No satisfactorily unified theoretical framework has yet been developed for explaining female criminality and gender differences in crime. Criminologists disagree as to whether gender-neutral (i.e. traditional theories derived from male samples) or gender-specific theories (i.e. recent approaches derived from female samples and positing unique causal paths for female as compared to male criminality) are better suited to these tasks. We take the position that the traditional gender-neutral theories provide reasonable explanations of less serious forms of female and male criminality, and for gender differences in such crime categories. Their principal shortcoming is that they are not very informative about the specific ways in which differences in the lives of men and women contribute to gender differences in type, frequency, and context of criminal behavior. Gender-specific theories are likely to be even less adequate if they require separate explanations for female crime and male crime.

Here we build on a framework for a “gendered” approach begun elsewhere (Steffensmeier & Allan 1995). This approach is compatible with the traditional, gender-neutral theories. The broad social forces suggested by traditional theories exert general causal influences on both male and female crime. But it is gender that mediates the manner in which those forces play out into sex differences in types, frequency, and contexts of crime involvements.

### *Key Elements of a Gendered Approach*

A gendered approach should include at least four key elements. First, the perspective should help explain not only female criminality but male criminality as well, by revealing how the organization of gender deters or shapes delinquency by females but encourages it by males. We use the term “organization of gender” to refer broadly to things gendered—norms, identities, arrangements, institutions, and relations by which human sexual dichotomy is transformed into something physically and socially different.

Second, a gendered perspective should account not only for gender differences in type and frequency of crime, but also for differences in the context of offending. Even when men and women commit the same statutory offense, the “gestalt” of their offending is frequently quite different. Because the gender differences in context are small for trivial or mild forms of lawbreaking, but large for violent and other serious forms of crime, contextual analysis can shed light on the gender differences for serious offenses—hitherto the most difficult to explain.

Third, compared to theories based on male crime, we need to consider several key ways in which women’s routes to crime (especially serious crime) may differ from those of men. Building on the work of Daly (1994) and Steffensmeier (1983, 1993), such differences include: (a) the more blurred boundaries between victim and victimization in women’s than men’s case histories; (b) women’s exclusion from most lucrative crime opportunities; (c) women’s ability to exploit sex as an illegal money-making service; (d) consequences (real or anticipated) of motherhood and child care; (e) the centrality of greater relational concerns among women, and the manner in which these both shape and allow women to be pulled into criminal involvements by men in their lives; (f) the greater need of street women for protection from predatory or exploitative males.

Fourth, the perspective should explore the extent to which gender differences in crime derive not only from complex social, historical, and cultural factors, but from biological and reproductive differences as well (Kruttschnitt 1995, Udry 1995).

Figure 3 summarizes a gendered paradigm of offending that takes into account the four criteria enunciated above. We sketch here key features of this

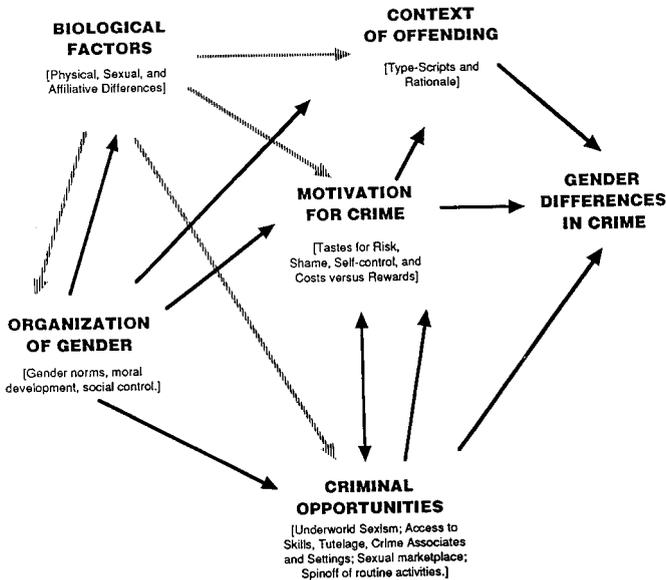


Figure 3 Gendered model of female offending and gender differences in crime. Broken line indicates weak effect; solid line signifies strong effect.

paradigm that affect men and women differently in terms of willingness and ability to commit crime.

### *The Organization of Gender*

The organization of gender together with sex differences in physical/sexual characteristics contributes to male and female differences in several types of relatively enduring characteristics that increase the probability of prosocial and altruistic response on the part of females but antisocial and predatory response on the part of males.

In the discussion that follows we elaborate briefly on five areas of life that inhibit female crime but encourage male crime: gender norms, moral development and affiliative concerns, social control, physical strength and aggression, and sexuality. Gender differences in these areas condition gender differences in patterns of motivation and access to criminal opportunities, as well as gender differences in the type, frequency, and context of offending. These areas are not discrete, but rather they overlap and mutually reinforce one another.

**GENDER NORMS** The greater taboos against female crime stem largely from two powerful focal concerns ascribed to women: (i) nurturant role obligations and (ii) female beauty and sexual virtue. In varied settings or situations, these concerns shape the constraints and opportunities of girls' and women's illicit activities.

Women are rewarded for their ability to establish and maintain relationships and to accept family obligations, and their identity tends to be derived from key males in their lives (e.g. father, husband). Derivative identity constrains deviance on the part of women involved with conventional males but encourages the criminal involvements of those who become accomplices of husbands or boyfriends. Greater child-rearing responsibilities further constrain female criminality.

Femininity stereotypes (e.g. weakness, submission, domestication, nurturance, and "ladylike" behavior) are basically incompatible with qualities valued in the criminal underworld (Steffensmeier 1986). The cleavage between what is considered feminine and what is criminal is sharp, while the dividing line between what is considered masculine and what is criminal is often thin. Crime is almost always stigmatizing for females, and its potential cost to life chances is much greater than for males.

Expectations regarding sexuality and physical appearance reinforce greater female dependency as well as greater surveillance by parents and husbands. These expectations also shape the deviant roles available to women (e.g. sexual media or service roles). Moreover, fear of sexual victimization diverts women from crime-likely locations (bars, nighttime streets) and reduces their opportunities to commit crimes (McCarthy & Hagan 1992, Steffensmeier 1983).

**MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND AMENABILITY TO AFFILIATION** Gender differences in moral development (Gilligan 1982) and an apparent greater inherent readiness of women to learn parenting and nurturing (Beutel & Marini 1995, Brody 1985, Rossi 1984) predispose women toward an "ethic of care" that restrains women from violence and other criminal behavior injurious to others. Women are socialized not only to be more responsive to the needs of others but also to fear the threat of separation from loved ones. Such complex concerns inhibit women from undertaking criminal activities that might cause hurt to others and shape the "gestalt" of their criminality when they do offend.

In contrast, men who are conditioned toward status-seeking, yet marginalized from the world of work, may develop an amoral world view in which the "takers" gain superior status at the expense of the "givers." Such a moral stance obviously increases the likelihood of aggressive criminal behavior on the part of those who become "convinced that people are at each other's throats increasingly in a game of life that has no moral rules" (Messerschmidt 1986, p. 66).

**SOCIAL CONTROL** Social control powerfully shapes women's relative willingness and ability to commit crime. Female misbehavior is more stringently monitored and corrected through negative stereotypes and sanctions (Simmons & Blyth 1987). The greater supervision and control reduces female risk-taking and increases attachment to parents, teachers, and conventional friends, which in turn reduces influence by delinquent peers (Giordano et al 1986). Encapsulation within the family and the production of "moral culture" restricts the freedom even of adult women to explore the temptations of the world (Collins 1992).

**PHYSICAL STRENGTH AND AGGRESSION** The demands of the crime environment for physical power and violence help account for the less serious nature and less frequent incidence of crimes by women compared to those by men. Women may lack the power, or may be perceived by themselves or by others as lacking the violent potential, for successful completion of certain types of crime or for protection of a major "score." Hustling small amounts of money or property protects female criminals against predators who might be attracted by larger amounts. Real or perceived vulnerability can also help account for female restriction to solo roles, or to roles as subordinate partners or accomplices in crime groups. This can be seen in a variety of female offense patterns, including the exigencies of the dependent prostitute-pimp relationship (James 1977). Together, physical prowess and muscle are useful for committing crimes, for protection, for enforcing contracts, and for recruiting and managing reliable associates.

**SEXUALITY** Reproductive-sexual differences (especially when combined with sexual taboos and titillations of the society as a whole) contribute to the far greater sexual deviance and infidelity among males. Women, on the other hand, have expanded opportunities for financial gain through prostitution and related illicit sexual roles. The possibilities in this arena reduce the need to commit the serious property crimes that so disproportionately involve males.

Although female offenders may use their sexuality to gain entry into male criminal organizations, such exploitation of male stereotypes is likely to limit their criminal opportunities within the group to roles organized around female attributes. The sexual dimension may also heighten the potential for sexual tension which can be resolved only if the female aligns herself with one man sexually, becoming "his woman."

Even prostitution—often considered a female crime—is essentially a male-dominated or -controlled criminal enterprise. Police, pimps, businessmen who employ prostitutes, and clients—virtually all of whom are male—control, in various ways, the conditions under which the prostitute works.

### *Access to Criminal Opportunity*

The factors above—gender norms, social control, and the like—restrict female access to criminal opportunity, which in turn both limits and shapes female participation in crime. Women are also less likely than men to have access to crime opportunities as a spin-off of legitimate roles and routine activities. Women are less likely to hold jobs as truck driver, dockworker, or carpenter that would provide opportunities for theft, drug dealing, fencing, and other illegitimate activities. In contrast, women have considerable opportunity for commission, and thus for surveillance and arrest for petty forms of fraud and embezzlement.

Females are most restricted in terms of access to underworld crimes that are organized and lucrative. Institutional sexism in the underworld severely limits female involvement in crime groups, ranging from syndicates to loosely structured groups (Steffensmeier 1983, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania 1991). As in the upperworld, females in the underworld are disadvantaged in terms of selection and recruitment, in the range of career paths and access to them, and in opportunities for tutelage, skill development, and rewards.

### *Motivation*

Gender norms, social control, lack of physical strength, and moral and relational concerns also limit female willingness to participate in crime at the subjective level—by contributing to gender differences in tastes for risk, likelihood of shame or embarrassment, self-control, and assessment of costs versus rewards of crime. Motivation is distinct from opportunity, but the two often intertwine, as when opportunity enhances temptation. As in legitimate enterprise, being able tends to make one more willing, just as being willing increases the prospects for being able. Like male offenders, female offenders gravitate to those activities that are easily available, are within their skills, provide a satisfactory return, and carry the fewest risks.

Criminal motivations and involvements are also shaped by gender differences in risk preferences and in styles of risk-taking (Hagan 1989, Steffensmeier 1980, Steffensmeier & Allan 1995). For example, women take greater risks to sustain valued relationships, whereas males take greater risks for reasons of status or competitive advantage. Criminal motivation is suppressed by the female ability to foresee threats to life chances and by the relative unavailability of type scripts that could channel females in unapproved behaviors.

### *Context of Offending*

Many of the most profound differences between the offenses committed by men and women involve the context of offending, a point neglected by quantitative studies based on aggregate and survey data. “Context” refers to the characteristics of a particular offense, including both the circumstances and the nature of the act (Triplett & Myers 1995). Contextual characteristics include,

for example, the setting, whether the offense was committed with others, the offender's role in initiating and committing the offense, the type of victim, the victim-offender relationship, whether a weapon was used, the extent of injury, the value or type of property destroyed or stolen, and the purpose of the offense. Even when males and females participate in the same types of crimes, the "gestalt" of their actions may differ markedly (Daly 1994, Steffensmeier 1983, 1993). Moreover, the more serious the offense, the greater the contextual differences by gender.

A powerful example of the importance of contextual considerations is found in the case of spousal murders, for which the female share of offending is quite high—at least one third, and perhaps as much as one half. Starting with Wolfgang's classic study of homicide, a number of writers propose that husbands and wives have equal potential for violence (Steinmetz & Lucca 1988, Straus & Gelles 1990). However, Dobash et al (1992) point out that the context of spousal violence is dramatically different for men and women. Compared to men, women are far more likely to kill only after a prolonged period of abuse, when they are in fear for their lives and have exhausted all alternatives. A number of patterns of wife-killing by husbands are rarely if ever found when wives kill husbands: murder-suicides, family massacres, stalking, and murder in response to spouse infidelity.

In common delinquency, female prevalence approaches that of males in simple forms of delinquency like hitting others or stealing from stores or schools, but girls are far less likely to use a weapon or to intend serious injury to their victims (Kruttschnitt 1994), to steal things they cannot use (Cohen 1966), and to steal from building sites or break into buildings (Mawby 1980).

Similarly, when females commit traditional male crimes like burglary, they are less likely to be solitary (Decker et al 1993), more likely to serve as an accomplice (e.g. drop-off driver), and less likely to receive an equal share of proceeds (Steffensmeier & Terry 1986). Also, female burglaries involve less planning and are more spontaneous, and they are more likely to occur in daytime in residences where no one is at home and with which they have prior familiarity as an acquaintance, maid, or the like (Steffensmeier 1986, 1993).

### *Application of Gendered Perspective to Patterns of Female Crime*

The utility of a gendered perspective can be seen in its ability to explain both female and male patterns of criminal involvement as well as gender differences in crime. The perspective predicts, and finds, that female participation is highest for those crimes most consistent with traditional norms and for which females have the most opportunity, and lowest for those crimes that diverge the most from traditional gender norms and for which females have little opportunity.

Let us briefly review some examples of property, violent, and public order offending patterns that can be better understood from a gendered perspective.

In the area of property crimes we have already noted that the percentage of female arrests is highest for the minor offenses like small thefts, shoplifting and passing bad checks—offenses compatible with traditional female roles in making family purchases. The high share of arrests for embezzlement reflects female employment segregation: women constitute about 90% of lower level bookkeepers and bank tellers (those most likely to be arrested for embezzlement), but slightly less than half of all accountants or auditors. Further, women tend to embezzle to protect their families or valued relationships, while men tend to embezzle to protect their status (Zeitl 1981).

Despite Simon's (1975) claim that female involvement in white collar crime was on the increase, in fact it is almost nonexistent in more serious occupational and/or business crimes, like insider trading, price-fixing, restraint of trade, toxic waste dumping, fraudulent product commerce, bribery, and official corruption, as well as large-scale governmental crimes (for example, the Iran-Contra affair and the Greyhound scandal). Even when similar on-the-job opportunities for theft exist, women are still less likely to commit crime (Steffensmeier 1980).

The lowest percentage of female involvement is found for serious property crimes whether committed on the "street" such as burglary and robbery or in the "suite" such as insider trading or price-fixing (Steffensmeier & Allan 1995). These sorts of offenses are very much at odds with traditional feminine stereotypes, and ones to which women have very limited access. When women act as solo perpetrators, the typical robbery is a "wallet-sized" theft by a prostitute or addict (James 1977, see also Covington 1985, Pettitway 1987). However, females frequently become involved in such crimes as accomplices to males, particularly in roles that at once exploit women's sexuality and reinforce their traditional subordination to men (American Correctional Association 1983, Miller 1986, Steffensmeier & Terry 1986).

Female violence, although apparently at odds with female gender norms of gentleness and passivity, is also closely tied to the organization of gender. Unlike males, females rarely kill or assault strangers or acquaintances; instead, the female's victim tends to be a male intimate or a child, the offense generally takes place within the home, the victim is frequently drunk, and self-defense or extreme depression is often a motive (Dobash et al 1992). For women to kill, they generally must see their situation as life-threatening, as affecting the physical or emotional well-being of themselves or their children.

The linkage between female crime and the gendered paradigm of Figure 3 is perhaps most evident in the case of certain public order offenses with a high percentage of female involvement, particularly the sex-related categories of

prostitution and juvenile runaways—the only offense categories where female arrest rates exceed those of males. The high percentage of female arrests in these two categories reflects both gender differences in marketability of sexual services and the continuing patriarchal sexual double standard. Although customers must obviously outnumber prostitutes, they are less likely to be sanctioned. Similarly, although self-report studies show male rates of runaways to be as high as female rates, suspicion of sexual involvement makes female runaways more likely to be arrested (Chesney-Lind & Shelden 1992).

Female substance abuse (as with other patterns of female crime) often stems from relational concerns or involvements, beginning in the context of teenage dating or following introduction to drugs by husbands or boyfriends (Inciardi et al 1993, Pettitway 1987). Women tend to be less involved in heavy drinking or hard drug use—those drugs most intimately tied to drug subcultures and the underworld more generally (Department of Health & Human Services 1984). Female addicts are less likely to have other criminal involvements prior to addiction, so the amplification of income-oriented crime is greater for female drug users. Female addict crimes are mainly prostitution, reselling narcotics or assisting male drug dealers, and property crimes such as shoplifting, forgery, and burglary (Anglin & Hser 1987).

### *Advantages of Paradigm*

A gendered approach helps to clarify the gendered nature of both female and male offending patterns. For women, “doing gender” preempts criminal involvement or directs it into scripted paths. For example, prostitution draws on and affirms femininity, while violence draws on and affirms masculinity.

At present it is unclear whether nontraditional roles for women will contribute to higher or lower rates of female offending. Traditional roles constrain most women from crime but may expose others to greater risks for criminal involvement. Wives playing traditional roles in patriarchal relationships appear to be at greatest risk both for victimization and for committing spousal homicide. Similarly, women emotionally dependent on criminal men are more easily persuaded to “do it all for love.” (Note, nevertheless, that men are also more easily persuaded by other men.) Cross-cultural differences complicate the issue further. For example, among gypsies, traditional gender roles prevail and male dominance is absolute. Yet, because gypsy women do practically all the work and earn most of the money, their culture dictates a large female-to-male involvement in thievery (Maas 1973).

A gendered approach can also help explain both stability and variability in the gender effect. A growing body of historical research indicates that the gender differences in quality and quantity of crime described here closely parallel those that have prevailed since at least the thirteenth century (Beattie 1975, Hanawalt

1979). Even where variability does exist across time, the evidence suggests that changes in the female percentage of offending (i) are limited mainly to minor property crimes or mild forms of delinquency (Hagan & Simpson 1993, Steffensmeier 1980) and (ii) are due to structural changes other than more equalitarian gender roles such as shifts in economic marginality of women, expanded availability of female-type crime opportunities, and greater formalization of social control (Beattie 1995, Steffensmeier 1993). The considerable stability in the gender gap for offending can be explained in part by historical durability of the organization of gender (Walby 1990). Certainly for recent decades, research suggests that the core elements of gender roles and relationships have changed little, if at all (for a review, see Steffensmeier & Allan 1995, see also Beutel & Marini 1995). Underlying physical/sexual differences (whether actual or perceived) may also play a part. Human groups, for all their cultural variation, follow basic human forms.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

An examination of gender patterns in crime reveals that there are both similarities and differences in female and male patterns of offending. Traditional criminological theories deserve more credit than they have received in recent writings in terms of their ability to provide general explanations both of female and male offending patterns and of the gender gap in crime. Certainly this is the case with minor acts of crime and delinquency which have been frequent objects of quantitative analysis. Likewise, the manner in which female and male rates of offending parallel one another across differences in time, race, class, and geography suggests that they are responding to similar social forces. Such findings suggest that there is no need for gender-specific theories.

On the other hand, explanation of serious crimes by males and females is more problematic, partly because the lower frequencies of offending complicate the task of quantitative analyses. Qualitative studies reveal major gender differences in the context and nature of offending. Traditional theories have not adequately explored such gender differences. Our gendered paradigm seeks a middle road that acknowledges both the utility of traditional theory and the need to describe how the organization of gender (and biological/physical differences) specifies the impact of social forces suggested by traditional theory. Space limitations prevent us from broaching some of the most important areas related to female criminality, such as patterns of female victimization (Price & Sokoloff 1995) and gender differences in criminal justice processing (for a review, see Steffensmeier et al 1993). Even our coverage of patterns and etiology of female offending is selective and cursory. Nevertheless, some

recommendations emerge from this review that could improve the yield of future theory and research.

We need to examine more closely whether various criminogenic factors (e.g. family, peers, schooling) vary by gender either in the magnitude or the direction of effects. Factors generally seen as uniquely relevant to the explanation of female crime (e.g. childhood abuse, personal maladjustment, victimization) should be explored in relation to male crime (Bjerregaard & Smith 1993).

Conventional theories were never designed to tap the encompassing structure and repetitive process of gender as it affects the criminal involvements of either women or men. Therefore we need to operationalize and test variables drawn from gendered approaches, particularly in relation to the explanation of serious and habitual criminal behavior.

Both theory development and research need to look more closely at the intersection of gender with other dimensions of stratification (Hill & Crawford). Do gender-specific effects of causal variables also vary by race, class, or ethnicity? Care must be taken to avoid confusing gender effects with other subgroup effects, however. Identification of gender effects must entail female-male comparisons within the same population subgroup. For example, the fact that arrest rates for black females exceed arrest rates for white males for some offenses tells us something about race effects but nothing about gender effects (Heimer 1995, Simpson & Ellis 1995, Sommers 1992).

So far, the study of criminal careers has centered almost exclusively on male offenders. As Gilfus (1992:64) notes, "Little attention has been paid to questions such as whether there is such a thing as a female 'criminal career' pattern and, if so, how that career begins and what shapes its contours." In-depth studies of serious female offenders need to focus on career dimensions such as onset, frequency, duration, seriousness, and specialization.

Such studies need to examine both the immediate context of the offense and the larger social setting of serious or habitual offending, following the fine examples set by Miller's (1986) study of street women, Campbell's (1984) research on girls and gangs, Steffensmeier & Terry's (1986) research on institutional sexism in the underworld, and Bottcher's (1995) study of high-risk male and female youths, and their siblings. Such studies reveal the extent to which the lives of delinquent girls and women continue to be powerfully influenced by gender-related conditions of life.

Some of the most profound contributions to our knowledge concerning gender and crime (including the studies cited in the previous paragraph) have come from criminologists who have exploited theory and research from other sociological specialities (e.g. family, organization, network analysis) in the study of female criminality. Also needed is application of a life course perspective to

female offending, as Sampson & Laub (1993) have done so effectively in their study of male offending.

We need a clearer understanding of the specific behaviors involved in particular crimes committed by women and men, the nature of their criminal roles, the circumstances leading to criminal involvement, the motivations for committing crimes, and the vocabularies used to justify their crimes. The same statutory charge applied to women and men may reflect very different behaviors and circumstances, as illustrated in the research on spousal homicide described above (reviewed by Dobash et al 1992).

Criminal opportunity has many dimensions that vary dramatically by gender. We need to understand how crime opportunities are shaped by legitimate opportunities, by the structure of the underworld, and by changes in productive and routine activities (Steffensmeier 1983, 1993). As already noted, women have little access to either upperworld or underworld opportunities for lucrative white collar or organized crime. Professional crime, traditionally dominated by white males, is on the decline.

Over the last three decades, the largest gains in female arrests relative to male arrests were for nonviolent economic crimes such as fraud and forgery—crimes now within the reach of virtually every American citizen. Changes in female motivation as well as in the social or economic position of females are likely to be less important than the nature of societal crime opportunities in shaping patterns of female offending and variations in the gender gap. This is a neglected area of research in criminology, and is one where sociologists with their expertise in broad societal trends can make a major contribution to the study not only of female criminality but also to crime more generally.

If significant differences in the gender gap are found, all plausible explanations should be explored. Tests of the gender equality hypothesis should attempt more suitable operationalization than assumed group differences in equality (such as age, race, urban residence). On the other hand, an interesting inquiry into the sociology of knowledge could address the longevity of the gender equality hypothesis in the face of so much contrary evidence.

Our knowledge about fundamental issues in the study of gender and crime has expanded greatly with the proliferation of studies over the past several decades, although significant gaps still exist. Given the relatively low frequency and less serious nature of female crime, expanding research on female offending may seem hard to justify. But research on the gendered nature of crime contributes to the understanding of male as well as female crime. Furthermore, the study of gender and crime is a productive arena for exploring the nature of gender stratification and the organization of gender more generally.

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