



## WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND CRIMINALITY

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### ABSTRACT

*There is (and always has been) a dichotomy on how women's achievements were perceived as compared to men. Achievements by women, no matter how commendable in themselves, were always benchmarked against similar achievements by men, mostly to the detriment of the former. The female was generally considered to be inferior to the male. Ironically, although many women conformed to the male perception, this itself was seen as a form of inferiority. The male was considered intelligent, assertive and objective while the female was seen as possessing contrary qualities. Thus, while the qualities in a man were seen in a positive reference frame the same qualities, if shown by a woman, was often considered in a negative light.*

### INTRODUCTION

This view of women was challenged by feminists in various ways. Some tried to prove that liberation has made women more like men and more able to compete on an even footing. Others attempted to force established theorists to rethink their ideas by taking into consideration a feminist perspective and allowing a more gendered approach to the whole question of criminology. Much of the research in these areas is in its infancy.

**Female Liberation:**

**The Proposition:**



Some of the theories suggested that people are not born criminal, but learn criminality or conforming behaviour from associates and from the environment in which they are brought up. Some writers, although recognising that in-born characteristics play a part, attach most importance to the society in which a person is brought up. If one accepts that it is through close conditioning that a woman learns to conform, and that it is this close supervision which prevents criminality, then any lessening of the control would lead to increased criminality. On this basic some, such as Adler and Simon, have claimed that the increase in female criminality in the last few decades is the result of reduced control, which they argue is the direct result of the women's liberation movement.

### Female Crime Statistics :

This early debate is particularly useful and relevant because of the clarity with which it exposes the statistical problems. Any attempt to answer this question runs into all the problems about statistics: not only their reliability but also about their manipulation and interpretation. Carol Smart (1979) puts forward a relatively refined assessment. She turned to the official statistics for England and Wales and, while noting their obvious shortcomings, attempted to make use of them to test whether female criminality is caused by emancipation. She noted that indictable offences by women had nearly doubled from 1965 to 1975 and that the bulk of such increases had taken place in crimes of violence. Male crime had also increased, but the percentage increases for the same period were a lot smaller than for women.

During that decade, the percentage increase in indictable offences for men was 83, and for women 95. But large percentage changes can arise from small changes in the absolute numbers. For example, there was a 500 per cent increase in murder by women between 1965 and 1975, but it went from one case to five cases in that period. Generally, she argues, it is false to compare percentage increases in male and female crimes. Female crime figures tend to start from a small absolute base: but in male crime the absolute figures are high at the outset, so that even a relatively large increase will only show a small percentage (for example from 10000 to 11000 would only be a 10 per cent rise but would include 1000 more cases, whereas from one to five is a 500 per cent increase but only four more cases). Smart also claims that, to see the general trend, it is necessary to consider increases over a number of decades.

Table 1 shows a fluctuation in crime figures over the period 1935-1999. It portrays a general increase in female compared with male crime over this substantial period. More significantly for the present purpose, it shows that the period immediately preceding women's liberation generally shows a higher increase in female crime than the later period when emancipation was presumed to be leading to the greater involvement of women in criminal activity. Indeed,

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on this measure, there is an actual decrease in female criminality in the 1980s and 1990s. The effect is seriously to question, if not refute, the claim that there have been more increases in female crime since the women's liberation movement began to have world-wide prominence in the 1960s.

The area is clearly full of statistical traps for the unwary. One of the fullest British discussions on the numerical increase in female crime and the question of whether or not it is linked with women's emancipation came in 1983 from Steven Box and Chris Hale. They attack the whole idea of a link between female criminality and liberation and reject most previous arguments on the ground that earlier writers commit one or more of the following errors :

1. A failure to take into account changes in the number of females available to commit crimes in each particular year. Most researchers look at the number of crimes committed in various years without looking at whether the number of women has changed, and particularly without discovering if the number of women between 15 and 65, that is, those most likely to commit crimes, has changed.
2. Failure to take into account the change in male crime. If this is also increasing, then although female crime may be increasing absolutely (that is, when compared to female crime in other years), it may not be increasing relative to male crime. If both increase at the same rate then, although there may be need to be concerned about crime in general, it is uncertain whether there should be concern about female crime in particular.
3. Failure to break down the broad categories of crime recorded in the criminal statistics into different types of crime, particularly those that are more theoretically relevant.
4. Failure to specify theoretically and measure rigorously the other dependent or independent variables which may have had an effect on the statistics. This would include, for example, changes in the law, or in the recording of statistics or in court practices.
5. Failure to apply relevant statistical tests to the data so that significant changes and relationships between the independent and dependent variables can be identified. That is, they do not try to test how much of an effect each of the factors may have had.

In an analysis of statistics, Walkalte (1995) concluded that men and women commit similar types of crimes although women offend at a much lower rate and commit serious offences far less frequently than men do. Women tend to commit theft and handling and drug offences (Heidensohn, 2000-2001). Violence against the person only counts for about 10 per cent of their criminal activities, and it is this low level of violence that is of most significance.

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Heidensohn also states that in self-report studies women always report far lower rates of criminal activity than do men, while in one such study, Graham and Bowling (1995) discovered that female offending peaks at an earlier age (13 or 14) than for male crime, and thus female emancipation is likely to be a major influence.

These surveys of statistical data cast serious doubt on the notion that there is a causative correlation between female crime and female emancipation. If, however, the arguments based on criminal statistics are left to one side for a moment, there are still those who propose that women's liberation must have affected female crime. They say it has led to an increase in legitimate opportunities for women, allowing them even after marriage to leave the home and work, which necessarily leads to increased criminal or other socially unacceptable opportunities for women.

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