Theories of crime and gender

Frances Heidensohn (1985) notes how female crime was either invisible or sociologists assumed stereotypical ideas on females because: Male dominance of offenders, Male domination of sociology or ‘male-stream’, What interests male sociologists is exciting [male] rebellion – ‘value-laden sociology’

Her three explanations for female crime are:

Socialisation: From infancy, children are socialized that the two sexes are different. Female roles contain such elements as caring, passivity, and domesticity. Male roles, on the other hand, stress elements of toughness, aggressiveness and sexual conquest. It is argued that females generally lack the values that are typically associated with delinquency. However, laddette behaviour challenges this.

Sex-role theory argues that women are less likely to commit crime than men because there are core elements of the female role that limit their ability and opportunity to do so. There are a number of different versions, all of which can fit quite comfortably together.

* **Socialisation**: according to this approach, girls are socialised differently to boys.

The values that girls are brought up to hold are those that simply do not lead to crime. **Parsons (1937)** argues for instance, that most child rearing is carried out by mothers, girls have a clear role-model to follow that emphasises caring support.

* **Social Control**: Females are less likely to commit crime because of the closer levels of supervision that they are subjected to at home in childhood. This control carries on throughout life, with the role of women being more constrained than that of males.
* **Lack of opportunities:** in order to commit crime, a person needs to have the opportunity to do so. The narrow range of roles that women are allowed have consequently limits their opportunities to commit crime, as they are more confined by their socialisation and social control than men. The result of these three influences on the lives of females, is to deflect them away from offending and towards conformity.

Frances Heidensohn (1985) says women commit so few crimes because of the ways in which they are ideologically controlled. Firstly, in the way in which societies are cemented together by a shared value system. Secondly, in the way bonding occurs within relationships of family, the peer group, and the school.

There was an assumption that because women were confined to the private world with limited access to the public world they lacked opportunity for crime.

However, this situation is changing, with women occupying roles in the workplace and public life. Women still have less opportunity for crimes but Wilkinson found in California that where women were equal to men, they were engaged in similar levels of white-collar crime.

Biological explanations

This approach has been used by different writers to explain why the overwhelming bulk of women do not offend and conversly why a small minority do. It starts from the belief that women are innately different from men, with a natural desire to be caring and nurturing – both of which tend not to be values that support crime. ‘Normal’ women are therefore less likely to commit crime.

Transgression theory-

This theory stems from the fact that feminist sociologists as they felt that they were not really adequate explanations for the differences between male and female causes for offending.

**Carol Smart (1990)** introduced the idea of transgressive criminology. By this, Smart was suggesting that criminology itself as a discipline was tied to male questions and Concerns and that it could never offer answers to feminist questions.

Transgression in the feminist sense of the word is used to describe going beyond the boundaries of criminology.

Transgression is a good example of postmodern influence in sociology.

Domestic Violence

Betsy Stanko (2000) found an act of domestic violence is committed every six seconds in Britain. It is estimated that a quarter of all violent crimes committed are "domestics“.

In 45-70% of cases, the father inflicts violence on the children as well as the mother (BMA Report, 1998).

Victims of Crime

The relationship between crime and the wider patriarchal social control of women in society. Traditional gender role socialisation (male = dominant). The link between the ‘crisis of masculinity’ (powerlessnes at work, divorce, unemployment) and crimes against women.

Men’s reaction to the feminisation of the labour force and the growing economic and cultural power of women. The sexual objectification of women: women as property.

Chivalry thesis

Some argue women are more deviant than they appear and are protected by a ‘chivalry factor‘ by police, courts, etc.

Hilary Allen (1987) argues mental health explanation (including PMS) for female criminality results in lighter punishments by the courts.

Masculinity

Jesse Messerchmidt argues that masculinity is something males have to constantly work at. A businessman can achieve masculinity through the exercise of power over women in the workplace, whereas a man with no power at work may express his masculinity through control of women in the domestic situation – e.g. domestic violence.

Aggressive Masculinity

Men may express their masculinity through criminal behaviour, e.g. fighting, football hooliganism, etc. Bea Campbell (1993) argues young men seek compensation for lack of breadwinner status through 'aggressive masculinity'. The forms of masculinity adopted involve control over technology (stolen cars) over public space (the streets); violence against the 'other' (Asian shopkeepers and women).

Enjoyment of deviance

Katz (1988) argues that criminology has failed to understand the role of pleasure in committing crime. This search for pleasure is meaningful when equated within masculinity’s stress upon status, control over others, and success. Violent crime is 'seductive' undertaken for chaos, thrill and potential danger.