

# Women and Crime: doing it for the kids?

Pamela Davies reviews feminist criminology and suggests an updated appraisal of women's crimes and motivations.

In recent years feminist theorizing around gender and crime has focused predominantly on women as victims in their own homes and communities rather than as offenders. From this same perspective, even those women convicted of criminal offences are often reframed as victims. This article outlines some of the evidence suggesting feminist criminology might reconsider women as offenders in order to more fully appreciate and understand the crimes that women commit within the environs of the local informal or criminal markets.

## Women's crimes

When women commit crime, their participation in types of criminal activities, according to any method of measurement, demonstrates a clear gender patterning. Criminal women tend to commit property offences which might tentatively be labelled 'economic crimes'. These include specific types of thefts including customer theft or shoplifting, cheque frauds, forgeries, deceptions, drug related offences and offending related to sex work such as prostitution or soliciting. It is not surprising then that feminist criminologists have tended to emphasize women's conformity in light of the clearly evidenced gender patterning of offending rates and offending specialisms. Neither is it surprising that criminologists have tended to explain the actions of those women who resort to crime in response to their historical, socio-economic and political position in patriarchal society. Feminist criminologists since the 1970s have argued that women on the whole commit crime as partners and wives — for their men — and as mothers for their children. Women commit crime in the name of the family — to feed, clothe, provide for and sustain a family. Female offenders have been perceived as victims not only of their marginalized socio-economic position generally, and within the family in particular, but literally as victims of violence and abuse within families. Whilst girls have been identified as victims of child abuse in the home, women have been framed as victims of their menfolks' sexual, conjugal and domestic violence. Women have also been reframed as victims in the feminization of poverty thesis (Carlen 1988).

A very small number of women however are convicted of violent offences. These are in a minority but once again there is a pattern to their offending linked to their close personal relationships and their families. Some women commit serious violent offences against their families and against their male partners in particular. These are the women who kill, we argue, after having suffered years of abuse from their partners. These women have struggled to find victim status when confronting the criminal justice

system, officially the attitude seems to be that these are 'bad' women.

## Life on the margins

Hence women's crime has latterly been explained in the context of poverty and economic marginalization. Women's entry into crime has largely been explored, both in the UK and the US, in terms of a limited range of passages or routes. 'Street women' (Miller 1986, Daly 1994), harmed and harming women, battered women and drug-connected women (Daly 1994) tend to represent the dominant pathways into criminalisation. Carlen (1988) summarizes this as women making a life, in poverty and in crime. Such theorizing has led feminist criminologists into campaigns for justice and for better and alternative ways of dealing with women throughout the criminal justice system and in particular in our prisons. We have only comparatively recently understood the economic crimes of women in this way, not as pathological, but as the actions of women on the margins of economic and social life making a life within the context of poverty through shoplifting and prostitution.

Women's involvement in crime has most recently been explained by the feminization of poverty thesis which appears to explain why an overwhelming majority of female offenders commit property crimes or crimes that might be labelled 'economic'. However, poverty cannot explain all female crime and not all women who commit crime are poor (Croall 1998). In Daly's (1994) research some of the women's biographies did not fit any of the profiles of criminal women discussed so far. A small but significant minority committed offences that had economic motives unrelated to a drug addiction or to a street life. One of Carlen's most renowned co-authors of *Criminal Women*, Jenny Hicks, claims she established her own criminal firm, defrauded the post office out of a quarter of a million pounds and used the profits from this to finance a lifestyle which included drugs (Hicks, in Carlen *et al*, 1985). Carlen (1988) also identifies 'Dee' who rescued herself from the poverty of a low wage job by engaging in a lucrative but illegal occupation. Dee saw herself as a professional person providing 'special services' for financial gain and Carlen acknowledges that women can commit crime for very much the same reasons as men — as a rational choice.

## Is 'economic crime' a man's game?

In my own research 'Claudia the stocktaker' the professional and specialist shoplifter or 'grafter' provides an example of a woman making choices



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about her offending. When asked about the extent of her shoplifting she replies: "I was out every day six days a week. In six months I was nicked once and I was engaged in hundreds (of crimes)". Or Natasha, an all round expert on all forms of shoplifting, customer related thefts and frauds for all manner of goods including clothing, food and appliances. Natasha explained to me that shoplifting: "...was a part a big part of me life for a long time, a lot of years I was out shoplifting. I was... doing it for about five or six years and it wasn't just like a few weeks". Both Claudia and Natasha were involved in shoplifting as their main source of income over a sustained period of time. Similarly Lucy says: "I was a kite – someone who does shopping for other people using stolen cheque books... The money was fantastic" (Hart 2000), whilst Sofia, a prostitute, says: "I work in a flat now. It's brilliant. I can take £500 on a good day" (Gentleman 1997).

These extracts suggest that interesting questions need asking about what constitutes economic crime for women and about women's motivations to commit 'economic crime'.

At a theoretical level Walklate (2001) is also still asking whether men and women are differently motivated to commit crime. The extent to which women are motivated to commit crime for need rather than greed is open to question (Davies and Jupp 1999, Croall 2001). This applies to women who commit the traditional female crimes of shoplifting, welfare frauds and street level prostitution as much as it does to women and girls who have a drugs habit, are involved in violent crimes or gangs, sex and drugs work, frauds and forgeries and white collar crimes. However as Croall (2001) points out, in view of the absence of any research effort to look at the variety of white-collar crimes committed by women, questions surrounding the extent to which there may be rational women 'entrepreneurs' participating in crime because of its seductive attractions and rewards is difficult to judge.

Feminist theorizing has argued that women are differently and more fundamentally inter-connected to community, family and interpersonal relationships than are men. Indeed this is at

the core of feminist criminology yet only half of this side of the economic crime coin has been developed. Feminist criminology has only partially explored the theoretical avenues exposed by the gender patterning of crime that evidences these particular gendered relationships to the social world. The apparent gap in the theorizing about women's participation in informal activities that fall within the fuzzy boundaries between legal and illegal activity, and in criminal activities that contribute to the criminal economy, is becoming increasingly difficult to justify. Families and communities remain key sites for informal economic activities in which women engage and as such they represent important research locations for more comprehensively understanding women's crime for economic gain.

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