

# Women, Crime and Work: gender and the labour market

**Pamela Davies** calls on criminologists to light the flame of criminological inquiry into the relationship between gender, crime and work.

“*I was in the grey survival zone wherein daily existence was a constant assessment of who needed my attention most: the children, the office or my husband.....When I wasn't at work, I had to be a mother, I owed it to work to be at work. Time off for myself felt like stealing. The fact that no man I knew ever felt that way didn't help. This was just another area in which we were unequal: mothers got the lioness's share of the guilt” (Pearson 2003).*

Allison Pearson eloquently sums up women's long-suffering experiences of juggling the burden of work both inside and outside of the family home. Sociological research has similarly addressed the gendering of the labour market and the problems women have in balancing work and a private life. As a result, it can be suggested that the changing and complex relationship women have to work is generally charted waters. However, what of the complex triangulation of women, crime and work?

## Gender and crime

Crime for men and boys is routinely characterised either as an alternative or supplement to acquiring money and possessions by legitimate means such as waged work and paid employment, and/or as something undertaken to fill in time, escape boredom, experience excitement and achieve status and respect. In contrast, crime for women and girls has traditionally been characterised by mad and bad images. Feminist criminology has challenged this oversimplified distortion of women who do crime and modern theorising on female criminality tends to depict criminal women more as victims than offenders, hence adding sad to the image portfolio. Women's crime is now largely explained in terms of their harmful pasts, their experience of violence, their relationships with violent and abusive men and their own and their children's marginal material position and economically dependent reliance upon these men and/or the state.

Crime for women is thus routinely characterised as something done for other people's benefits, for men and for their children (Davies 2003). These women have been reframed as victims in the feminisation of poverty thesis as providers, women who are pushed and propelled into crime in order to provide for their families. The majority of female offenders who engage in crime specialise in property crimes such as shoplifting offences. These

'economic' crimes are the hallmarks of women struggling to make ends meet.

## Crime as work?

This however is not the full story of women who do property crime. We are still reluctant to characterise criminal women for what they are. Why is women's crime still not real crime and why are the women who do it not real criminals? Why are we so reluctant to concede that women mean to do crime? How can we explain the recent rise in the female prison population and an apparent influx of women who are dependent upon drugs and connected to the drug trade? Are there no rising white-collar women entrepreneurs, no 'frilly-cuff' (Goldstraw 2002) Ms. Saunders or Leesons? Goldstraw's work in progress suggests two categories of women involved in white-collar crime: those who, from a humanitarian/needs-based perspective generally commit the offence for economic or family reasons, and those who, from a more instrumental perspective, commit crime for greed, ego and self-esteem and whose accounts are not dissimilar to those given by male offenders (Goldstraw 2002). But as Croall (2001) points out such research is scarce and it is difficult to judge the extent to which there may be rational women 'entrepreneurs' participating in crime because of its seductive attractions and rewards.

## Women who blur the boundaries

I have recently argued for a closer look at the question of whether economic crime is a man's game and a more extensive critical examination of the economic in relation to women who do crime more generally (Davies 2003a, Davies 2003b). This points to the ways in which at least some criminal women appear to oscillate between doing crime for economic reasons, justifying themselves as 'provisioners' and doing crime because it is attractive and they are pulled towards it through economic greed and the attractions of illegal money making (Davies 2003).

Women might not be doing crime the same as men are and they may not be doing it for the same reasons, but women's relationship to both crime and work can now withstand much greater and sophisticated scrutiny. Why not open our minds to investigate the possibilities that women are greedy entrepreneurs and financiers in the drugs market as well as 'provisioners'. Whilst some have pointed towards men's and women's different participation

in white collar crime few have taken up the challenge of exploring and exposing the significant gender similarities and differences in this rich and expansive area. Several invisible criminological terrains remain for us to explore. There are invisible justifications for women's crime that have yet to be examined, there are invisible female offenders whose 'grafting' and crimes may indeed represent work – the professional shoplifter or specialist purse-pincher, the kite, the drug dealer and the prostitute who plods along the 'hard road to ho' (Maher 1997). There are also women who, having a legitimate job, also have the additional opportunities to do their crime at work – white-collar thefts of embezzlement and fraud.

### Calling all criminologists

What does all of the above suggest in terms of women, crime and work? Clearly there are omissions and gaps in our criminological inquiries and some examples of these neglected areas are suggested. However, whilst further empirical work is clearly required there is ample evidence that our old traditional theoretical models cannot simply be made

relationship to crime and work at one level simply reminds us that women never neatly fit sociological or criminological categories. We women are especially responsible for messing things up, blurring boundaries and for complicating empirical inquiry and theoretical analysis. Thus, for women, crime and work remain as complicated and as interconnected as ever. It is beginning to emerge that women's familial and interpersonal relationships and experiences are inseparable and vital to our understanding of their participation in crime and work. One emerging indication about women who do crime for economic gain is that they appear to be caught between economic provisioning (need) and economic greed. Do women who earn their money through legal work feel similarly caught? And, like Pearson's character Kate Reddy when we too take time off, do we also feel like we are stealing – from our partners, children and work?

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### **Where are you feminists? Let us remind ourselves of, and return to, our pioneering days.**

to fit. What was good for the men was never likely to be good for the women. Some gendering of the labour market and its relationship to crime and criminality has long been evident where men and boys are concerned and although increasingly sophisticated analysis of crime and markets are appearing, women's part in these informal and criminal economies remains under-explored and feminist critiques also remain invisible. Where are you feminists? Let us remind ourselves of, and return to, our pioneering days. Let us stay ahead and chart our own territories. This project might extend and update the assessment of what is defined as work and what is not, of what is seen as crime and what is not and it might go on to unpick the complex relationships between crime and work and women's relationships with and experiences of both. It might revisit the crimes women do such as the fiddling or false claims in relation to insurance, tax and benefits, involvement in sex work and the sex industry, property crimes such as theft and shoplifting, working and claiming or 'doing the double', 'moonlighting' and finally the world of women who 'work' in the subterranean, informal and criminal economies – little explored by criminologists. It might also revisit women as offenders as well as on the margins, women who are co-accused with men, women doing crime to replace or supplement a lack of income from employment or provision from a male breadwinner or an inability to be legitimately independent of men.

This discussion of some dimensions of women's

### References

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