CJM
CRIMINAL JUSTICE MATTERS

CRIMINALISING WOMEN?

Women, crime and poverty

Exploring the connections between poverty and lawbreaking behaviour is hardly new to criminology; and although left wing and right wing criminologists might place a differing emphasis on the importance of poverty as a cause of crime this debate was given an added twist in the early 1980s in the development of what was called the 'feminisation of poverty thesis'. This thesis, originating in the United States, suggested that significant shifts were occurring in the population comprising 'the poor'. Women in particular, it was argued, were increasingly likely to find themselves living in poverty. A number of reasons were suggested for this; women were living longer and were thus likely to constitute a higher proportion of poor elderly people; changes in social policy were resulting in more women finding themselves with dependent relatives to care for supported only through the benefit system; more younger women were having children on their own placing them within the benefit system also; and as the gap between rich and poor expanded more women were likely to find themselves living in families on low incomes. The view was developed that these factors, overlaid by the sex segregated nature of the labour market and its inherent sexism, determined that women's chances of finding themselves in poverty had increased. The question remains, how and in what ways might this lead to women engaging in lawbreaking behaviour?

Offending women

'Women offer sex for sale as slump hits the valleys' ran a headline in *The Independent on Sunday* on September 15th 1991, reflecting one view of the interconnections between changing socio-economic circumstances and the way in which those circumstances might push some women towards lawbreaking behaviour. Indeed prostitution as part-time work has historically been one route through which women have supplemented meagre incomes. However this is not the only route into lawbreaking behaviour for women in tough socio-economic circumstances. Dee Cook in *Rich Law; Poor Law* (1988) argues that fiddling the benefit system is one kind of lawbreaking behaviour increasingly committed by women and increasingly seen as a rational response to being on benefit and in poverty. Women on welfare have few options open to them; they can succumb to the close regulation of their behaviour which the system demands in order to maintain their status as legitimate claimants, they can turn to men for support, or they can engage in crime. Given the problems in adhering to the first option and the likelihood that some women choose to be on their own for a range of reasons to avoid the second, failure to declare earnings or losing your benefit book can seem far more attractive ways of supplementing your income. Of course, what Cook goes on to point out is how much more effectively this kind of lawbreaking behaviour is policed than that associated with tax evasion, for example. Prostitution and defrauding the benefit system, however, may be transitory rather than permanent responses to poverty. The question is raised concerning what kind of motivating factors for lawbreaking behaviour might be associated with the careers of female offenders committing more serious crime.

Pat Carlen's study of the criminal careers of 39 lawbreaking women, *Women, Crime and Poverty* (1988), offers a life history account of how these women became serious lawbreakers. Four key factors are identified as constituting turning points in their criminal careers; being in residential care, having a drug or alcohol addiction, looking for excitement, and being in poverty. Thirty two of these thirty nine women had been poor all their lives; though not all of them by any means attributed particular importance to this factor necessarily above any of the others. So poverty can propel some women into crime. The question is, to what extent is this the result of the 'feminisation of poverty'? Or to put the same question another way, is poverty any more a significant variable for women than for men in promoting lawbreaking behaviour? One way of exploring an answer to this question is to re-examine the evidence for the 'feminisation of poverty'. Martha Gimenez (1990) attempts to do this.

The growth of poverty

The analysis offered by Gimenez is an historical exploration of the changing composition of the poor in the United States from 1966 to 1984. From this data she concludes that the proportion of poor men grew at a faster rate than the proportion of poor women during this time, and that this was particularly problematic for young poor men. In other words, this analysis suggests that whilst women do constitute a significant proportion of those people who find themselves poor, the general trends being observed could just as well be interpreted as being part of the increasing imiseration of the working class. Indeed as Will Hutton (1994: 23) has recently argued; 'single parents, the young unemployed, and families living on income support are propelling the growth of poverty', in general circumstances in which the gap between the rich and the poor appears to be ever widening. In other words, there is no reason to presume that conditions for women are worsening at a rate any greater than other groups of people who find themselves poor. Indeed, given the analysis offered by Bea Campbell (1993) of the civil disturbances of 1991 there is some reason to argue that worsening economic conditions are taking a particular toll on the young, especially young men.

The changing labour market

Taking a closer look at the empirical evidence then, and consequently taking into account the general changing economic circumstances of poor people; the relationship between women, crime and poverty, and men, crime and poverty may be very similar. As Steven Box (1987) argues in *Recession, Crime and Punishment*, this is not to provide an excuse for criminal behaviour but merely to understand that people make choices in circumstances not of their own choosing. Box also makes the point that, if we are to appreciate the full nature and extent of criminal behaviour, we need to appreciate that being in work rather than out of work is also criminogenic. As we move towards a situation in which women constitute the higher proportion of those adults comprising the full-time working population, it will be interesting to see what sense, if any, criminologists attempt to make of such changes in the labour market and women's criminality.

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