

Outline and Assess Sociological Explanations for Gender Differences in Crime Rates

Current statistics show that men commit 80% of all crime and women commit only 20%. However there are arguments to suggest that the statistics highlight an under representation of female criminality, and there are many sociological arguments to suggest that female criminals are treated more leniently. On the other hand, some sociologists believe women are treated more harshly when they commit certain types of crime. This essay aims to assess the reasons for gender differences in reported crime rates.

Official crime rates are measured by crimes reported and recorded by the police and criminal justice system, and are collected by the Home Office. Frances Heidensohn (1975) believes that male criminality is 5 times higher than female criminality, which current data supports. However, Otto Pollak (1961) was the first sociologist to argue that crime rates for female crime were inaccurate. He believed that women were treated more leniently by the police and criminal justice system, which highlighted the under representation of female criminality in the official statistics. He argued that women were more likely to commit crimes such as petty theft, prostitution and criminal abortions, which were then likely to be treated more leniently. Pollak's theories have been widely criticised and may not be relevant today; indeed he failed to take into account the decriminalisation of abortion in many of the countries which he studied.

However, the concept of leniency has been further studied since Pollak's research, and has led many sociologists to advocate the chivalry thesis. Anne Campbell (1981) highlights this in her research that suggested women were more likely to be cautioned, instead of imprisoned, whereas men nearly always received a prison term for the same crime. Hillary Allen (1989) also concluded that for serious crimes women were more likely to escape imprisonment.

On the other hand, however, Frances Heidensohn (1985) believes that women are treated more harshly, especially for crimes where they are seen to deviate away from 'normal' womanly behaviour, and are perhaps seen to be 'doubly deviant'. This can be highlighted with a recent case reported in the Guardian; two children were locked in an upstairs bedroom while their parents enjoyed a romantic meal downstairs and a fire broke out in the upstairs bedroom killing both children. The mother received a harsher prison sentence than the father. It could therefore be argued that she was seen as more deviant, because as a mother she should be the nurturer and carer. Merton (1930s) believed that women were socialised to be caring as this was the role society allocated to them. Parsons (1930s) also highlighted that girls were raised to be caring; therefore any action that shows the female to be uncaring is deemed to be more shocking and treated more harshly by society. *Parsons' views however may be outdated in modern society, as female socialisation is often undertaken solely by men or by full time childcare.*

Carol Smart (1989) argues that men are treated more leniently within the criminal justice system, and she bases her views on how rape trials are conducted. She argues that the justice system often sees males expressing their natural dominant sexuality, and it is in fact women who are on trial. However Smart's research is perhaps now

outdated as there has been increasing media pressure to alter the way rape trials are conducted. Recent changes in the law highlight that the onus is now on the man to prove consent was given, rather than for the woman to prove consent was withheld. Similarly, domestic violence, according to Dobash and Dobash was once not regarded as criminal with many men escaping conviction. This is now changing, with the inclusion of specialist domestic violence units set up to improve handling of these crimes.

When assessing gender differences in crime, sociologists have also looked to understand the reasons for each gender to commit certain types of crime. Freda Adler (1975) believed the Women's Liberation Movement caused an increase in female criminality, with women not only dominating the previously male-dominated workforce, but also the male criminal world. Women were afforded greater opportunities to commit crimes such as embezzlement and fraud. Marxists however would argue that as these types of white-collar crime are under-reported in the statistics anyway, there is little evidence to back up Adler's claims. Pat Carlen (1988) also disagrees with the theory that Women's Lib. caused a rise in female criminality and argues that as most female criminals are working class, they are the least likely to benefit from Women's Lib, which was essentially a middle class movement. From her research she highlights that most female criminality is theft and handling.

Males from a working class background are also the most likely to commit crime according to recent statistics. Simon Winlow (2001) believes that unemployment within the working classes leads to many men feeling less masculine, which reinforces Merton's concept of anomie. Criminal activity is therefore a means of achieving economic success. However this cannot explain why many men commit violent crime. Messersmidt (1993), on the other hand, believes that violence and physical aggression are ways of reinforcing masculinity among working class men.

In conclusion, therefore, some sociologists maintain that women are treated more leniently, which accounts for the under-representation of female criminality in the statistics. Yet, on the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that in some incidences women are treated more harshly, and that it is men who are afforded lenience. It can therefore be contended that, after taking into account these opposing arguments, crime rates do actually present a reasonably accurate picture of gender differences.