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Introducing women and crime

One of the most remarkable developments in publishing in recent years has been the growth in the number of books for, about and by women. In particular, handbooks and guides of every sort have appeared, encouraging women to realise themselves emotionally and educationally and imparting skills in everything from building to banking. There is too a growing range of women’s studies – books designed to explain and analyse aspects of women’s experience both for the concerned general reader and for the increasing numbers of students of women’s studies or sex and gender courses which are now offered. This book will, I hope, share some of the characteristics of both these types. While it is not intended to be a how-to-do-it handbook for female criminals, I have included as comprehensive a selection as I could of what we know about women and crime, women and criminal justice, and women’s experience of imprisonment. At the same time, I have tried to extend and develop an understanding of the deviance and conformity of women which will, I trust, prove useful both to students of women’s studies and to the professional looking for a guide to the maze of assertions and counter-assertions about, for instance, the ‘new’ female criminal.

The plan of the book is as follows. In this chapter, I shall set out the main characteristics of women’s contribution to criminality and the issues and problems associated with this. The next four chapters deal with the accounts women themselves have given of their experiences of crime and their reactions to these, with the impact on women both of the criminal justice system and of their imprisonment, and social reactions to female deviance. The subsequent three chapters present an account of developments in theorising
about women and crime and are followed by a chapter which analyses the social pressures to conform which affect women, through the images of deviant women and through the structuring of their social position. In short, the first part of this volume contains as full a description as possible of which women become officially defined as delinquent, how they feel about their stigmatisation, and what happens to them with the police and in court and in prison. The second section concentrates on presenting and analysing both conventional and feminist approaches to the understanding of female criminality and suggests some new perspectives.

The issues

There are probably two observations about female criminality with which many people will be familiar. First, and much the best known, is that over long periods of time and in many differing judicial systems, women have a consistently lower rate of officially recorded crimes than men. There are many ways of presenting this, but one clear one is given by Farrington (1981, p. 174) in estimating the accumulation of criminal convictions over a lifetime in England and Wales:

This analysis shows 11.70 per cent of males convicted up to the seventeenth birthday, 21.76 per cent up to the twenty-first birthday, and 43.57 per cent at some time in their lives. For females, the corresponding figures are 2.10, 4.66 and 14.70 per cent.

In other words, females are not only much less criminal than males, they are so much less criminal that whereas convictions are, statistically at least, ‘normal’ for males, they are very unusual for females. Indeed Farrington predicts a lifetime prevalence for males by 1989 in excess of 50 per cent (Farrington, 1981).

The second observation which has been increasingly stressed by feminist and other commentators since the 1960s is that this low criminal-participation rate has not been sufficiently remarked upon nor studied. Feminists have seen it as another example of the characteristic ‘invisibility’ of women in social science or social policy, while several non-feminist writers have pointed out that any