The debate on women and crime has been dominated by two paradigms during the last decades: The “power-paradigm” predicted a steep rise of female crime rates as a result of the thorough change of gender roles in this period, while the “victim paradigm” directed attention to rising rates of alcohol and drug addiction as well as mental health problems and suicides among women. Both paradigms have been linked by the proposition that the low involvement of women in crime was compensated by their higher rates of all types of passive problem behavior like depression or addiction. In this study, which covers the period from 1965 to 1990, both paradigms are examined by analysing female and male crime rates, as well as respective rates of alcohol and drug addiction, mental disorders, and suicides for all of Germany (before reunification), an urban metropolitan region and a rural state in the North of Germany. The results clearly show that both paradigms were wrong in exaggerating a negative impact of the process of emancipation. Until the early 1980s, female crime rates as well as proportions of other types of problem behavior only slightly gained compared to men, but since 1985 this trend has levelled off and has been inverted, most visible for crime rates. In contrast to both paradigms, these results show that women profited enormously in terms of mental health and other problem behaviors from the opportunities opening up in the process of emancipation. They clearly lend more support to two more recent theories, the “power-control” theory by Hagan and the “control-balance” theory by Tittle that both stress potential gains for women.

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“Power-Women” and Victim Paradigm: New and Old Myths on Female Criminality and Emancipation

Both women’s movements during the last hundred years were accompanied by the same fear: that the emancipation of women, their entry into the domains of men and the subsequent adoption of male behaviour would inevitably have very negative effects on female morals and on the moral state of society in general. The further emancipation progressed, the more women would be plagued by alcoholism, suicide, psychological disorders, and, most of all, criminality. This was the common conviction among intellectuals, scientists, and politicians. The mostly male advocates of this perspective did not seem to realize that such claims painted a particularly bleak picture of their own gender and men’s faults. The “new social problem of female criminality” was repeatedly discovered by Lombroso and Ferrero (1894), Thomas ([1920] 1967), and—finally, for the first time by a woman—Adler (1975). Adler saw the dark side of the women’s movement in the increase of violent and aggressive crimes committed by women as well as in mounting rates of economic crimes in which she had perceived an over-proportional increase in female criminals. For an American police chief, the women’s movement of the 1960s had triggered the “greatest crime wave” the world had ever seen (Weis, 1976), and pessimistic prognoses predicted equal crime rates for men and women by the year 2000 at the latest (see Smart, 1979; D.J. Steffensmeier, 1978, 1980; Simon, 1975). As many other predictions about the turn of the millennium, this one definitely did not come true.

What was actually triggered first of all was a flood of empirical studies with contradictory findings. Adler’s critics focused initially on four points: (a) the databases and measurements underlying her hypothesis; (b) the “masculinity hypothesis” that the adoption of either male or feminist role orientations would lead to a general increase in female crime as well as an increase in specific crimes (James and Thornton, 1980; Loy and Norland, 1981; Shover et al., 1979); (c) the “participation hypothesis” that the general increase in participation of women in public life, their “stepping out of the domestic circle”—as the German Socialist leader August Bebel had termed it in 1892—and their increased occupational activity would open up the entire range of opportunities for criminal activity to women that had previously been available to men only; this hypothesis was based fundamentally on the equalization of opportunity structures (see Datesman et al., 1975; Hoigard, 1990); finally (d) the “chivalry hypothesis,” that women who had previously profited from the chivalry of men in the organizations of judicial control would now gain the same status as men as a result of balancing out gender roles and the increase in female