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## Chesney-Lind, Meda: Feminist Model of Female Delinquency

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In the 1980s, Meda Chesney-Lind began outlining why criminological theories were inadequate in their explanations of female delinquency. She posited that theories were androcentric, focusing on the experiences of males. However, these theories are applied to both genders as if they were universal propositions. In 1988, with coauthor Kathleen Daly, Chesney-Lind argued that current thinking failed to recognize the unique factors that differentiate females from males and the factors that predispose females to crime differently than males. She contended that an increasing number of girls are entering the criminal justice system and, therefore, require the attention of system officials and researchers as a separate subgroup. Furthermore, according to Chesney-Lind and Lisa Pasko, females become involved in the system for different crimes and status offenses (offenses that are only illegal for juveniles) than their male counterparts.

To address these issues, Chesney-Lind developed a feminist model for female delinquency. She argued that American society is patriarchal, [p. 153 ↓] meaning that it is dominated by males and that females are relegated to second-class status. This patriarchy subjects females to a powerless situation where they have an increased likelihood of victimization, both sexual and physical. This victimization and powerlessness in the context of a patriarchal society leads girls into delinquency, particularly as their coping mechanisms for their victimizations are criminalized. For example, running away from an abuser is a status offense, which is often punished by periods of incarceration for juvenile females. Moreover, the juvenile justice system treats female offending differentially, and therefore females are punished more harshly for committing similarly non-severe status offenses when compared to their male counterparts. Finally, because of the harsh punishment of girls' coping strategies, the criminal justice system becomes a tool for the social control of females. Indeed, it is a system that is aimed at subjecting females to further oppression by limiting their reactions to patriarchal authority (Chesney-Lind, 1989).

This entry provides a brief discussion of the contributions of Chesney-Lind in developing a model of female juvenile delinquency. To cover this material, this entry is divided into three sections. This first presents information on why female delinquency must be studied. The second section provides the feminist critique of mainstream criminology and the response of Chesney-Lind to criticism of the feminist perspective. Finally, the third section reviews Chesney-Lind's model of female delinquency.

# The Importance of Studying Females

Prior to Chesney-Lind's research, most criminologists ignored the study of females in the criminal justice system. There are not equal numbers of female and males involved in the juvenile and criminal justice systems, as males commit an overwhelming majority of crime in the United States. However, Chesney-Lind and Pasko presented three pieces of information supporting their contention that criminologists must study female crime separately from male crime. First, female crime is increasing at a rate greater than male crime. Second, female and male juvenile delinquents engage in different crime. Third, punishments meted out for male and female juvenile delinquency are not equitable.

Chesney-Lind contends that male and female crime are increasing at unequal rates. In particular, the arrest, prosecution, and incarceration of females have increased dramatically since the 1970s. Males' involvement in the criminal justice system has also risen; however, the rates of females have risen at around twice the rate of males. Chesney-Lind and Pasko argue that this rise suggests that female criminal involvement is affected by factors different than males, making it necessary to study females as well as males.

In "Girls in Jail," Chesney-Lind states that girls commit different crimes than boys. Specifically, females tend to commit less serious crime than males, including a greater number of status offenses. Examples are truancy, running away, and incorrigible behavior. From the data she analyzed, Chesney-Lind contends that female juveniles accounted for 46 percent of status offenses in court records, while they only account for 14 percent of juveniles referred to court. Further, around 2 percent of girls were arrested for serious violent crime, whereas boys were more than 5 times more likely to be arrested for these crimes. Chesney-Lind interprets these data to mean that juvenile females commit less serious crime than juvenile males. Therefore, because males and females commit different crimes, it is necessary to study female crime separately from male crime.

In addition to females committing different crimes than males, female juveniles are differentially punished for the crimes that they commit compared to their male

counterparts. Females are disproportionately referred to juvenile court by their parents. Girls are jailed for status offenses at rates higher than males. Finally, delinquent females spend comparable time in state custody to males for less serious delinquent behavior. From this evidence, Chesney-Lind surmises that females are treated differently than delinquent males for comparable illicit behavior. As such, because punishment is not equitable for boys and girls that come into contact with the criminal justice system, it is necessary for criminology to study female crime distinctly from that of males.

Although Chesney-Lind provided arguments for the necessity of studying juvenile females as distinct from their counterparts, the development of feminist criminology and the entrance of [p. 154 ↓] feminist thought into scholarly work in the field were challenged. Therefore, the argument for why feminist thought was needed was paramount to the development of Chesney-Lind's model of female delinquency.

## The Critique of Feminist Thought

To appreciate fully the importance of Chesney-Lind's theory, it is vital to understand feminist thought and the inadequacy of mainstream criminological theories. This section briefly discusses the feminist perspective, provides responses to the critique of feminist scholarship in criminology, and provides a discussion of the need for feminist scholars to develop unique theories for women's crime.

Feminist thought presents the idea that gender affects all aspects of social life. Every social relationship and every social construct is affected by gender relationships and the perceptions of males and females. As crime is a social construct, feminist researchers assert that gender necessarily affects crime (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004).

Specifically, feminists assert that women have been systematically disadvantaged because of their gender. Females are unable to meet all of their goals and potential in their lives because of this discrimination and bias. Further, for equality to exist for women, radical social change must occur, especially regarding those aspects of society that affect women's lives (Delmar, 1986). Notably, feminist scholars and feminist thought became more accepted in many academic fields by the late 1980s.

Before this time, criminology had been largely androcentric. That is, theories were developed by conducting studies of males. However, the theories that resulted were applied to all humans universally. This problematic assumption contributed to females being left out of theories. Specifically, according to feminists, major criminological theories apply to males more accurately and completely than they apply to females. Feminist researchers lobbied for changes in research and theory to explain female crime, but their pleas have not always been fully answered, according to Kathleen Daly and Chesney-Lind.

Daly and Chesney-Lind posit that there are misunderstandings of the feminist perspective that lead to theorists in criminology failing to focus on women. First, they argue that feminists are seen as biased and subjective. Critics assert that feminists are biased in their claim that gender is important and that interpretations of social phenomenon must be gendered. Daly and Chesney-Lind respond that analysis of social phenomenon, history, and social relations has always been written from the male perspective. Moreover, there is the faulty assumption that all that has been written from the male perspective is objective. Daly and Chesney-Lind contend that feminists do not seek to supplant men from the examination of crime. Rather, the goal is to reexamine prior theories by taking women into account and to treat women as equal to men in the development of explanations of criminal behavior.

Second, feminists are seen as only concerned with women, and thus as ignoring males. This is the antithesis of the criticism that feminists assert depicts mainstream criminology. However, Daly and Chesney-Lind assert that this reaction arises because men are displaced from their traditional status of being the central importance to theories of crime. Nevertheless, they argue that the study of both men and women is necessary to understand criminal behavior. Therefore, feminist theories still seek to explain male criminality, while understanding the effects that gender can have on theory.

Third, feminists and their research are seen as unitary and consensual. Critics claim that feminist scholars present only one depiction of women and only seek to change social policy and social theory in narrow ways. But again this assumption is rejected by Daly and Chesney-Lind. They contend that feminist scholarship is as rich and diverse as mainstream criminology. Feminist criminology encompasses multiple

perspectives on crime, each with differing assumptions and constructs of interest, much like mainstream criminology.

Beyond the critiques of the positions and work of feminists, some scholars persisted in examining females and crime. Daly and Chesney-Lind identified two main camps of scholars that arise when trying to examine the female crime problem. The first camp seeks to examine whether theories developed for males and tested on males apply to females. The second camp examines whether differential crime rates between genders can be attributed to any theoretical factors or constructs. Specifically, these scholars study why there is a gender gap in offending or why men commit a much greater amount of crime than women.

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Daly and Chesney-Lind maintain that researchers should not simply utilize these two strategies separately. Moreover, if scholars truly wish to examine female crime, theories need to be developed specifically for women. Examining if male theories apply to females and why there is a gender difference in crime rates is insufficient to explain women's crime. Rather, it is necessary to develop theories based on research on women and girls, much like mainstream theories had previously been developed.

## A Feminist Model of Female Delinquency

In the context of her helping to design the parameters for a feminist criminology, Chesney-Lind endeavored to develop her own theory of female delinquency. Below, the core ideas of her model, as presented in her 1989 article "Girls' Crime and a Woman's Place" are described.

Chesney-Lind begins by arguing first that current criminological theories are inadequate to explain female crime and, second, that altering these theories to account for women is impossible. These theories cannot be altered because they were never meant to explain status offenses, the bulk of girls' illicit activity. Further, the sexualization of female crime, in particular, poses problems for all theories that were developed from research on males. The sexualization of female crime refers to the history of the juvenile

justice system arresting and incarcerating females for “inappropriate” sexual and “immoral” behavior more prominently than males.

Due to the inability to alter mainstream male-based theories to provide an adequate account of female offending, Chesney-Lind presented principles that all theories of female delinquency should follow. Her model is premised on the assumption that female delinquency must be examined in the context of the patriarchal society to which girls are subjected. That is, the position of girls in society is paramount to understanding their offending behavior. Moreover, it is necessary to understand that acknowledging patriarchy does not mean explaining female crime solely based on patriarchy. Specifically, Chesney-Lind mentions that increases in female delinquency are not a result of society becoming less patriarchal. In addition, it is inadequate simply to state that females commit less crime than males because they experience patriarchal control. Rather, it is necessary not only to acknowledge the role of patriarchy in a theory of female crime but also to have separate causal mechanisms explaining female delinquency.

Chesney-Lind identifies the starting point in the causal sequence leading to female delinquency. She argues that juvenile females experience a great deal of conflict with parents and guardians. This conflict results from the patriarchal society. Girls are more controlled and more closely watched than their male counterparts, simply due to their being females. Conflict comes in multiple forms. Certain tension exists from parental control causing conflict. Additional conflict results from the physical and sexual abuse of females, which Chesney-Lind observes is pervasive among girls who eventually are involved with the criminal justice system. Sexual and physical abuse is a particular threat for young women because of their subservient role to the adult males in their lives.

Physical and sexual abuse leads to trauma in juvenile females. Trauma is characterized by changes in behavior, such as depression, acting out, inappropriate sexual behavior, and running away. These behaviors are coping mechanisms for girls who have experienced trauma. Females involved in the criminal justice system are especially likely to have run away from home in order to deal with trauma in their lives. Specifically, girls leave homes because much abuse occurs there, in large part due to a female's position as sexualized and subservient to male authority in the household.

Additionally, females may be held at home to be subject to more abuse, because of parents' ability to use the social control of the juvenile justice system to keep them under control. Thus, because of the harsh punishment of girls' coping strategies, the criminal justice system becomes a tool of social control of females—one that is aimed at subjecting females to further oppression by limiting their reactions to patriarchal authority. For example, a girl may be physically and sexually abused by her father or stepfather. As a result, a girl may become a runaway and engage in illegal behavior to survive on the streets, both financially and emotionally. However, a girl's parents can turn to the criminal justice system, which then may return the girl home, thus forcing her back [p. 156 ↓] into an abusive home. This is the manner by which a girl's reaction to patriarchal authority is limited.

Finally, Chesney-Lind posits that these girls, having left home, further engage in criminal behavior in order to survive. Once away from home, females will engage in theft, exchange of sexual activities for goods and money, and drug and alcohol use.

To summarize, Chesney-Lind proposes that women are subject to a patriarchal society. Young women in their households are subject to physical and sexual victimization from male authority figures. To escape from this abuse, girls run away and engage in criminal behavior to cope with the trauma of abuse and to survive on the streets. This leads females into contact with the juvenile justice system, as girls' coping mechanisms for trauma are defined as illegal.

## Conclusion

Chesney-Lind viewed criminology in the 1980s as ignoring females, particularly female delinquency. She contended that girls' criminal behavior is different from that of males and that the treatment of females by the criminal justice system is also different. For these reasons, Chesney-Lind advocated for the development of feminist criminology and presented her own model of female delinquency.

At this time, feminist criminology has been largely accepted by mainstream criminology. Although many may ignore its theories and arguments, feminists have developed their own journals, divisions in professional associations, and research agendas for the field.

Moreover, increasing amounts of research has been conducted on topics of importance to feminist criminologists, particularly women's victimization and interaction with the criminal justice system (Chesney-Lind, 2006). Other researchers in the field, such as Joanne Belknap, credit Chesney-Lind as being instrumental in the development of feminist criminology and for the perspective's vitality.

Notably, Chesney-Lind sees threats and opportunities for feminist criminology in the future. The major threat to feminist criminology is the pervasive social and political backlash to progressive movements, particularly the feminist movement. Crime and gender have become politicized, with certain political groups seeking to undermine the contributions of feminist criminology and the gains that have been made through this research. In particular, efforts have been made to reinstate a more patriarchal system of social control, which can be used to formally control the behavior of women and minorities (Chesney-Lind, 2006).

Despite the backlash, Chesney-Lind believes that feminist criminology has an opportunity for increased scholarly production and for exerting positive effects on society. Moreover, in "Patriarchy, Crime, and Justice," she argues that feminist criminologists have an urgent duty to produce more work now than in the past. Specifically, feminist scholars must aim their scholarship at policies and research that are eroding the gains made by the feminist movement. Among other salient topics, they can study the effects of the increasing incarceration of women and the contemporary portrayal of female crime in the media.

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See also

- [Adler, Freda: Sisters in Crime](#)
- [Klein, Dorie: The Etiology of Female Crime](#)
- [Simon, Rita J.: Women and Crime](#)
- [Smart, Carol: Women, Crime, and Criminology](#)
- [Steffensmeier, Darrell J., and Emilie Andersen Allan: A Gendered Theory of Offending](#)

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