

GENDER AND CRIME

Contemporary Theoretical
Perspectives

Sandra L. Browning
Leah C. Butler
Cheryl Lero Jonson
editors

ADVANCES IN CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORY • VOLUME 30

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Gender and Crime

This volume takes stock of contemporary perspectives on gender and crime. In 1975, Freda Adler published her pathbreaking book, *Sisters in Crime: The Rise of the New Female Criminal*. She made the bold claim that changes in American society—including changing attitudes and opportunities—would allow for greater participation of women in criminal enterprises.

Beyond her substantive thesis, which turned out to be partially accurate, Adler opened up a vibrant new area within criminology: the study of gender and crime. Now nearly a half-century later, the field of criminology is replete with women scholars who are making plentiful and important contributions. As a result, this volume explores cutting-edge issues. Part I starts by laying out a theoretical foundation, focusing on the origins of theories of female criminality, and then providing an overview of more contemporary perspectives. Part II explores the role of race in shaping women's criminality, drawing on the novel approaches of "Black Criminology" and the study of intersectionality. Part III gives attention to issues that heretofore were male-centric, illuminating female desistance from crime, the effects of peer groups, and gender differences in attitudes toward criminal justice policies. Finally, Part IV considers the explanation of three important realms of criminality—risky lifestyles, white-collar crime, and terrorism.

This volume will be of interest to a wide range of criminologists and is an ideal choice for use in graduate seminars and upper-level undergraduate courses.

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Gender and Crime

Contemporary
Theoretical Perspectives

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Volume 30

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Contents

Preface vii

Part I. Theoretical Foundations

1. The Invention of Feminist Criminology: Foundational Perspectives 3
Francis T. Cullen, Sandra L. Browning, and Cheryl Lero Jonson
2. Current Perspectives on Female Offending 32
Stacy De Coster and Lisa Broidy
3. Masculinities and Crime 52
Stephen Tomsen and James W. Messerschmidt
4. Moving beyond Binary Sex: Understanding the Victimization and Offending Patterns of LGBTQ+ People in the United States 78
Y. Gail Hurst

Part II. Race and Gender

5. Black Criminology and Female Offending 99
Leah C. Butler and Cecilia Chouhy

Part III. Life-Course Perspectives

6. Women and Social Bonds during the Desistance Process 129
Katheryne Pugliese, Lila Kazemian, and Alex R. Piquero
7. Gender, Narrative Identity, and Desistance 155
Damon M. Petrich and Heejin Lee
8. Gender, Peers, and Delinquency 180
Kyle J. Thomas and Jennifer O'Neill

vi Contents

9. Attitudes toward Criminal Justice Policies: Further Evidence against the “Gender Gap”	210
<i>Alexander L. Burton, Haley N. Puddy, Sunmin Hong, and Velmer S. Burton, Jr.</i>	
Part IV. Three Realms of Criminality	
10. Risky Lifestyles and Girls’ Involvement in Crime	231
<i>Pamela Wilcox and Carlos M. Gonzales</i>	
11. Gender and White-Collar Crime	259
<i>Nicole Leeper Piquero</i>	
12. Women’s Involvement in Terrorist Organizations	281
<i>Melissa M. Sloan and Murat Haner</i>	
List of Contributors	299
Index	301

Preface

Nearly half a century ago, four scholars—Freda Adler, Rita Simon, Carol Smart, and Eileen Leonard—forged a new way of thinking that forever changed the field of criminology. Unlike their predominately male predecessors and contemporaries who theorized and examined men’s criminality, Adler, Simon, Smart, and Leonard explored a topic that, up to that point, largely had been ignored: women’s involvement in the criminal justice system. As a result, Adler, Simon, Smart, and Leonard were unique not only in that they were some of the very few women working in criminology in the 1970s and early 1980s, but also because they cultivated a new line of criminological inquiry that continues to thrive today—feminist criminology.

With the emergence of feminist criminology, the field could no longer ignore the impact of gender on criminal offending, victimization, and responses to crime. Rather, gender became a chief organizing construct in which to view crime and justice. The subsequent research produced from this line of thought provided much insight not only into women’s and girls’ offending but also into men’s and boys’ offending, illustrating both similarities and differences. As this line of inquiry has evolved, so, too, has the field’s theorizing about gender. More recent work has explored the intersectionality of race, class, and sexual orientation as well as moving beyond binary views of femininity and masculinity.

As approximately 50 years have passed since Adler, Simon, Smart, and Leonard catapulted gender into the minds of criminologists, this volume seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of contemporary thinking surrounding gender and crime. Thus, the volume is divided into four parts. Part I of the volume provides the theoretical foundations of feminist criminology. In Chapter 1, Francis T. Cullen, Sandra L. Browning, and Cheryl Lero Jonson provide a historical overview of how the seminal work done by Adler, Simon, Smart, and Leonard resulted in the emergence of feminist criminology. Chapter 2 by Stacy De Coster and Lisa Broidy then provides an overview of more contemporary thinking about gender and criminal offending, highlighting the need to incorporate both feminist and intersectional theorizing. This is followed by Chapter 3, where Stephen Tomsen and James W.

Messerschmidt take a slightly different approach to the role of gender on crime by exploring how gender, specifically masculinity, uniquely impacts men's criminal offending. Part I concludes with Chapter 4. Here, Y. Gail Hurst moves beyond the traditional binary view of gender and explores the victimization and offending patterns of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Part II explores the intersection of race and gender in criminal offending. In Chapter 6, Leah C. Butler and Cecilia Chouhy examine the role of Black criminology and female offending. This chapter provides an overview of trends in Black female offending and contact with the criminal justice system and discusses how the Black criminology and feminist criminology frameworks could help us understand these trends.

The volume then shifts to Part III where scholars bring gender into our current thinking about desistance, criminal involvement, and public opinion, which historically has been predominately male-centric. In Chapter 6, Katheryne Pugliese, Lila Kazemian, and Alex R. Piquero explore how the social bonds of employment, marriage, children, and family impact women's desistance from criminal behavior. Chapter 7 also examines women's desistance from crime; however, Damon M. Petrich and Heejin Lee discuss how men and women differentially narrate their experiences during their movement out of crime. Next, in Chapter 8, Kyle J. Thomas and Jennifer O'Neill explore the "gender gap" in criminal behavior in relation to gendered differences in peer interactions. Chapter 9 wraps up Part III. In this chapter, Alexander L. Burton, Haley N. Puddy, Sunmin Hong, and Velmer S. Burton, Jr. provide findings from a recent national-level survey on the public's perception of expungement and the use of specialty courts, finding that there is little difference between men and women in their support for these policies.

Part IV ends the volume and focuses on three unique realms of criminality in which gender has been underexplored. In Chapter 10, Pamela Wilcox and Carlos M. Gonzales discuss the intersectionality of girls' risky lifestyles with broader societal conditions and its relationship to girls' criminal behavior. Next, Chapter 11 by Nicole Leeper Piquero sheds light on how two common correlates—age and gender—impact involvement in white-collar crime. The volume concludes with Chapter 12. In this chapter, Melissa M. Sloan and Murat Haner provide a comprehensive overview of women's recruitment, motivations, and roles in terrorist organizations.

The seeds planted by Adler, Simon, Smart, and Leonard have continued to blossom and inspire scholars nearly 50 years later. The collection of essays in this volume continues this legacy of placing gender as a central focus in criminology. By revisiting the past, developing new ways of theorizing, exploring new and emerging constructs of gender, and empirically examining the connections between gender and crime across a variety of realms, the scholars in this volume actively are contributing to an ever-growing body of research on gender and crime, while simultaneously creating more diverse and inclusive field.

Cheryl Lero Jonson, Leah C. Butler, and Sandra L. Browning
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Part I

Theoretical Foundations



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The Invention of Feminist Criminology: Foundational Perspectives

*Francis T. Cullen, Sandra L. Browning,
and Cheryl Lero Jonson*

In 1975, Freda Adler published her pathbreaking book, *Sisters in Crime: The Rise of the New Female Criminal*. She made the bold claim that changes in American society—including emancipatory attitudes and expanding opportunities—would allow for greater participation of women in criminal enterprises. Beyond her substantive thesis, which turned out to be partially accurate, Adler opened up a vibrant new area within criminology: the study of gender and crime.

Although perhaps the most celebrated of commentators on women and crime at this historical juncture, Adler (1975) was not alone in giving life to a new line of criminological inquiry. Two other consequential books appeared at virtually the same time and with related themes. They did not cite one another and thus were written independently—a fact showing that the prevailing context was nourishing a new way of thinking about the female offender. First, like Adler from the United States, Rita Simon (1975) published *Women and Crime*. The second book, from the United Kingdom, was authored by Carol Smart (1977), *Women, Crime and Criminology: A Feminist Critique*. A fourth volume of significance, which did cite Adler, Simon, and Smart, was contributed shortly thereafter by Eileen Leonard (1982), *Women, Crime, and Society: A Critique of Theoretical*

Criminology. Taken together, these four works, published in a delimited time span, helped to lay a firm theoretical foundation on which other perspectives would build. It is the purpose of this chapter to examine how these books contributed to the “invention” of feminist criminology (see also Merlo & Pollock, 2015).

It would be reductionist to argue that these four works alone comprised the entire landscape of inquiry on women’s criminality at this time (Merlo & Pollock, 2015). In 1979, for instance, David Horton and Marjorie Kravitz compiled “a selected bibliography” on “the female offender” that listed 82 sources with accompanying abstracts. In the same year, Freda Adler and Rita Simon co-edited *The Criminology of Deviant Women*, which included 35 selections of previously published writings. Based on 12 panels at the 1980 meeting of the American Society of Criminology, Marguerite Warren (1981) organized a volume of eight works in *Comparing Female and Male Offenders*. And to give another example, Nicole Hahn Rafter and Elizabeth Stanko (1982b) pulled together 16 essays in their *Judge, Lawyer, Victim, Thief: Women, Gender Roles, and Criminal Justice*. By the end of the 1980s, Kathleen Daly and Meda Chesney-Lind (1989) could write a classic essay, “Feminism and Criminology,” synthesizing a now-large literature and articulating “the promise of female inquiry for rethinking problems of crime and justice” (p. 497). This review, which has been cited nearly 1,500 times, was invited to be published in *Justice Quarterly* by then-editor Francis T. Cullen.

Although other writings were emerging slowly and then more rapidly in the mid-1970s and beyond, the books by Adler, Simon, Smart, and Leonard had a particularly salient influence. Their importance can be traced to the fact that these were book-length volumes that offered either theoretical propositions and/or theoretical analysis. As a result, their project was to inspire a *cognitive transformation* in how female offenders were portrayed. In their own way, they offered a view that rooted women’s criminality in social causes rather than in individual pathology and the failure to perform the so-called “natural” feminine obligations. Collectively, they called for fresh ideas, linked to a changing social environment, as the foundation to move forward with the study of women and crime. In this sense, they played an integral role in “inventing” feminist criminology.

Why bother to read works that are a half-century old? Herbert Gans (1992) notes that academics have a short attention span and are guilty of “sociological amnesia”—or, if that term is too strong, they suffer

“from a structurally encouraged case of forgetfulness” (p. 785). This view is triggered by what Gans (1992, p. 785) calls the “evolutionary myth” that research is always improving and thus that newer knowledge is better than older knowledge (p. 785). Merton (1984) termed this the “fallacy of the latest word.” Older works thus cannot be dismissed as outdated and irrelevant. They may contain kernels of truth or key insights that would be missed today. Ignorance of the past is no recipe for knowledge of the present.

In our case, works from the 1970s, written then as contemporary studies of women and crime, are now historical documents. They allow us to understand how ways of thinking emerged at a particular time—diverse in some respects, overlapping in others—and confronted the field with knowledge that could not be ignored. They directed criminology down a novel pathway and the discipline has never been the same. If the study of women and crime has developed and matured, reading foundational books allows us to learn how this scholarly area was birthed.

This chapter begins by bringing us back to the 1970s and reminding us of the world in which female criminologists lived. This discussion situates the quartet of authors (Adler, Simon, Smart, and Leonard) in their social and intellectual contexts and how this affected their collective efforts. This section is followed by a more specific focus on each author’s classic contribution. We conclude by calling for the celebration of these pathbreaking scholars and for today’s criminologists to consider revisiting the writings of these “sisters in criminology.”

Context

The four “sisters in criminology” comprising this chapter’s focal point were writing in the midst of what would be called “the women’s liberation movement.” This insurgency was not the first women’s movement. That honor is attached to the suffragette campaign, extending back to the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention in New York convened by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. This summit concluded with a pledge to secure the franchise for women. Often called “first-wave feminism,” these efforts would culminate with the ratification in 1920 of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution according women the right to vote—a right not achieved in the United Kingdom until 1928 (“Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution,” 2023). The amendment read:

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State in account of sex.

Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

The women's movement emerging in the 1960s had a more sweeping goal. Its purpose was to "liberate" women from the social, civil, and legal constraints that rendered them second-class citizens (Burkett, 2023). From today's vantage point a half-century later, it is difficult to imagine the sexism and exclusion females faced. Legislation and social activism reversed many of these barriers by the mid-1970s, but their very existence is shocking.

Thus, at this time, women could not open a checking account, acquire a credit card, or secure a loan/mortgage unless these were cosigned by a male, typically her husband. It was not until 1973 that women could serve on juries in every state. They could not take legal action if experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace and could be fired if pregnant. Requirements for all-female flight attendants were oriented toward glamour: unmarried and no children, no eyeglasses, thin (under 135 pounds), attractive, and retired by age 35. Almost all were White. Wives could not refuse to have sex with their husbands; it would take until 1993 for marital rape to be a crime in all 50 states. Only 48% of women were employed in 1970 and they made 53% of male wages, figures that now stand at 73% and 86%, respectively. Because they were seen as too fragile, there was no women's marathon race in the Olympics until 1984. Many other examples of sex inequality could be cited, but we will mention just one more: higher education. With a few notable exceptions (e.g., University of Pennsylvania), Ivy League schools did not accept women until 1969; Columbia University only did so in 1983. It was not until 1975 that then-President Gerald Ford signed a law allowing women to enroll in the nation's all-male military academies (England et al., 2020; Haughn, 2022; Hill, 2020; Livesay, 2022; Lovett, 2023; McLaughlin, 2014; Schloesser, 2010; Turner, 2013).

The women's movement also intended to liberate women from the strictures of the traditional role of wife and mother. Even today, commentators can idealize the 1950s White American family, portrayed as stable and happy in a suburban house (Coontz, 1992). Does *Leave It to Beaver* come to mind? In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. She offered a stinging critique of the

“mystique of feminine fulfillment”—that the blueprint for a rewarding life was “to get married, have four children and live in a nice house in a nice suburb” (p. 13). Women were counseled to have no identity except that of mother and wife—none of their own. “Over and over,” observed Friedan (1963), “women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity” (p. 15). The message was clear: “truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for” (p. 14). Friedan documented, however, that many women did not find fulfillment but suffered from “the problem that has no name” (p. 15). They experienced a deep sense of frustration, desperation, and emptiness. “We can no longer ignore,” cautioned Friedan, “that voice within women that says: ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home’” (p. 32). Friedan (1963) started her book with these poignant words:

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—“Is this all?” (p. 15)

Friedan’s *The Feminist Critique* struck a chord and became a best-seller, with sales eventually reaching three million copies (Muñoz, 2021). It is also credited with drawing “large numbers of white, middle-class women to the feminist cause” (“The Feminine Mystique,” 2023). In 1966, Friedan helped to found NOW—The National Organization for Women (Muñoz, 2021). Her work is seen as inspiring, and being a product of, “second-wave feminism.” Recall that the first wave was the movement to give women the franchise, which culminated in the passage of the 19th Amendment during the Progressive Era (Burkett, 2023). Second-wave feminism advanced reproductive rights (contraception, abortion), rejected coerced traditional gender roles, and sought to end sexist discrimination in work and civil life (Pruitt, 2022). Arising in the 1990s, third-wave feminism would focus more on

race-class-gender intersectionality, on sexual harassment, and on patriarchy as a structural cause of persistent inequality.

Our four sisters in criminology are best seen as part of second-wave feminism (Lilly et al., 2019). Some hints of leftist ideas creep into Smart's (1977) and Leonard's (1982) books, but neither one lists "patriarchy" in its index. Adler (1975) and Simon (1975) fall into what Daly and Chesney-Lind (1989) term "liberal feminist" criminology. Their focus is on "socialization into gender roles," and their "strategies for social change" involve the "removal of all obstacles to women's access to education, paid employment, political activity, and other public social institutions" (p. 537). The goal is to enable "women to participate equally with men in the public sphere" (p. 537).

All four scholars have three key factors in common. First, they were, to use Malcolm Gladwell's (2008) term, "outliers." When they entered academia, the number of women earning doctoral degrees was "way below men's numbers" (England et al., 2020, p. 6991). Male faculty were the norm. When Paula Dubeck (author Francis Cullen's wife) arrived at the University of Cincinnati's sociology department in 1974, the nameplate on her door read: Paul A. Dubeck. Freda Adler has disclosed that early in her career, she similarly would receive mail addressed to Fred A. Adler (Cullen & Wilcox, 2015). As accomplished women in a male domain, Adler, Simon, Smart, and Leonard leaned forward to challenge sexist thinking and to break new ground in theorizing about women and crime. Note that the American Society of Criminology would not have a female president until 1989 and only three women would hold this position in the 20th century: Joan McCord in 1989, Joan Petersilia in 1990, and Freda Adler in 1995 (Petersen, 2006).

Second, they discussed and rebuffed early theories—for example, by Cesare Lombroso, Sigmund Freud, W. I. Thomas, and Otto Pollock—that, though diverse in details, linked female offending to the failure of defective women to comply with the traditional feminine role (for summaries of these perspectives, see Klein, 1973; Lilly et al., 2019; Smart, 1977). As Smart (1977) observes, "any rejection of the traditional female role, as in criminal behaviour, is indicative of a personality disorder" and seen as "a reflection of the *natural* qualities of the sex" (pp. 177–178, emphasis in original). Such offenders thus were portrayed as "bad women," victims of sexual impulses, suffering from penis envy, excessively passive or excessively masculine, and devious (Klein, 1973; Rafter & Stanko, 1982a). Female crime inevitably was sexualized and biologized. According to Smart (1977), the

ideas of these “classical theorists” were “based upon a particular (mis)conception of the innate character and nature of women” rooted in the “widely-held and popular belief in the non-cognitive, physiological basis of criminal actions by women” (p. 27). Simon (1975) put the matter more bluntly: “The theme of the women offender as a pathetic creature characterized much of the writing of criminologists and social reforms in the 1930s” (p. 6).

Third, Adler, Simon, Smart, and Leonard all insisted on investigating women directly and on bringing gender into the center of the criminological enterprise. Women were now to be studied in their own right, not relative to men and their traditional role of wife and mother. It would no longer be permissible to leave women out of studies of crime and delinquency, and it would be necessary to conduct research that was gender-specific with all-female samples. As Smart (1977) urged:

The aim must be not only to make visible the invisible, to restore women to their own right to social science, but to find alternative modes of conceptualizing the social world so that the interests and concerns of women are addressed and included rather than subsumed or ignored. (p. 180)

In short, the world of criminology could not be the same after Adler, Simon, Smart, and Leonard—among others—brilliantly illuminated the poverty of classic theories of female crime and alternative pathways forward. In a way, this scholarly convergence is reminiscent of the publication, within three years, of Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) self-control theory, Moffitt’s (1993) developmental taxonomy, and Sampson and Laub’s (1993) age-graded social bond perspective. In that moment, developmental-life-course criminology was born, and the field could not return to an era of cross-sectional studies of delinquents. In the same fashion, the publications of our “four sisters” created a powerful canon of knowledge that could not be ignored. The paradigm of *feminist criminology had been invented*—filled with new ideas and numerous puzzles to be tested and published (see Kuhn, 1970).

In the pages ahead, we will review briefly the key contributions of Freda Adler, Rita Simon, Carol Smart, and Eileen Leonard. If this excursion through their work is successful, we trust that more than a few readers will be tempted to revisit these sisters in criminology and, as we have, benefit from their wisdom.

Freda Adler: *Sisters in Crime*

Born on November 21, 1934, Freda Adler was encouraged to pursue higher education, which she did at the University of Pennsylvania, one of the few Ivy League institutions that admitted women. After earning her BA degree in 1956, she took a decade off from schooling to raise three children. Ever the outlier, Adler returned to Penn in 1965, earning her master's degree in 1968 and her doctoral degree in 1971. She was the only female in her graduate cohort, which contained a number of future notable criminologists (for biographies of Adler, see Flynn, 1998; Hartman & Sundt, 2010, 2011). As of this writing, Freda Adler is alive and well, living near family in California.

Adler had a course with Otto Pollock, one day disagreeing with her professor when he discussed whether females offended due to penis envy (Cullen & Wilcox, 2015). As she would write in *Sisters in Crime: The Rise of the New Female Criminal*, “it is not man’s penis that a woman strives for but his power” (1975, p. 9). At Penn, Adler was more influenced by Thorsten Sellin and, in particular, by Marvin Wolfgang—to whom she dedicated *Sisters in Crime* for being a “kind friend and wise mentor.” Standing on the shoulders of these giants, she was thoroughly imbued with the sociological imagination. Male–female differences in crime were not because each sex was “a species apart” or because a separate “female psychology” existed (1975, pp. 8 and 9). It is this assumption that led earlier theorists to present women as “being childish, devious, indirect, petty, seductive, inappropriately domineering, and incomprehensively manipulative” (p. 9). Rather, extant differences were because men and women had lived in distinct social worlds, one that exposed individuals to schemas and opportunities conducive to crime and one that did not.

Inherent in this sociological paradigm was that people exposed to the same conditions—perhaps a subculture of violence, the strains of modern life, or a lack of social control—would respond the same way by committing crimes. Adler had the clever insight that this response would be true not only *among* men but also *between* men and women. If females were exposed to the same criminogenic risk factors as men, they would be equally criminal. There was nothing intrinsic to women’s nature that would insulate them from becoming an offender.

At this momentous historical juncture, change was palpable. The women’s movement was challenging the “feminine mystique” that women should be confined to the role of wife and mother.

“The changing status of women,” observed Adler (1975), had affected virtually every aspect of their lives, including “family, marriage, employment, and social position” (p. 13). They were “no longer indentured to the kitchen, the baby carriage, or bedrooms of America” (p. 12). Whether as admirals, longshorewomen, policewomen, installers “found clinging to telephone poles,” mechanics, or high-level executives, women were “pushing their way into—and succeeding at— innumerable jobs, occupations, and positions traditionally thought to be ‘for men only’!” (p. 12). Also salient, an equalization was occurring among boys and girls in their “hopes and aspirations, perceptions and cognitions” and in their “maturing awareness of each other or themselves” (p. 251). Like two Venn diagrams once sitting apart from one another, the circles were now increasingly overlapping. The social worlds of men and women were converging.

The implications of this social transformation were unmistakable. “But what is clear,” concluded Adler (1975), “is that that as the position of women approximates the position of men, so does the frequency and type of criminal activity” (p. 251). This might be called her *liberation thesis*. As the subtitle of *Sisters in Crime* read, America was experiencing *The Rise of the New Female Criminal*. In the book’s lead chapter, titled “Changing Patterns,” Adler compiled data seemingly confirming this point:

During the twelve-year period between 1960 and 1972 the number of women arrested for robbery rose 277 per cent, while the male figure rose 169 per cent. Dramatic differences are found in embezzlement (up 280 per cent for women, 50 per cent for men), larceny (up 303 per cent for women, 82 percent for men), and burglary (up 168 per cent for women, 63 percent for men). (p. 16)

Although ignoring the nuances in her analysis, Adler’s message was boiled down to a simple and dramatic conclusion: Women’s liberation had a dark side; it led to more crime among women. Female crime was not pathological but, like the waywardness of men, a normal response to exposure of criminogenic influences and opportunities. This thesis was not only timely but also beautifully written in *Sisters in Crime*. Her book was a social science masterpiece and a literary masterpiece. This combination—as well as her charm and brilliance—contributed to Freda Adler becoming a celebrity. She appeared on diverse television venues, including *Face the Nation*, the game shows *What’s My Line?*

and *To Tell the Truth*, and the late night *Johnny Carson Show* (Hartman & Sundt, 2011). As Flynn (1998) notes, she would give “over 300 interviews to newspapers, news magazines, television (her first television interview was with Barbara Walters), and radio networks” (p. 3).

It is important to note that Adler was not arguing that women participating in the women’s liberation movement were prime candidates for crime. She recognized the following written about an interviewee named Marge:

She, like the majority of incarcerated women throughout the country, comes from a lower socioeconomic level and tends to identify with a value code embracing the “traditional” image of women.... Marge will not tolerate the mention of women’s liberation, she considers it synonymous with lesbian. (pp. 7–8)

The transformation was broader and more far-reaching. It was less a political consciousness than a “new feminism” in which more women were taking jobs, going to school, and controlling their bodies (Adler, 1975, p. 27). Perceptual barriers were being deconstructed as women felt able to manage their finances, play sports, and delay marriage. Many activities and life trajectories that once were not envisioned were now seen as possible. Crime was not immune to this new consciousness:

The new feminism is an all-pervasive consciousness which has permeated virtually every level of womanhood in America.... And most relevant to our subject, it describes the women who have concluded that prostitution and shoplifting are not their style; embezzlement, robbery, and assault are more congenial to their self-image. (1975, pp. 26–27)

Research has shown that many of the changes in crime predicted by Adler did not materialize fully. Female participation rates approximate those of males in drug use, shoplifting, embezzlement at work, and minor violence in private settings (Schwartz & Steffensmeier, 2015). However, “when it comes to the most serious violent and lucrative property crimes,” note Schwartz and Steffensmeier (2015), “the gender gap tends to be rather large” (p. 231). Full convergence in offending thus did not occur. A number of factors likely contributed to the

stability of women's crime patterns that did not mirror those of men: slow changes in gender roles, sexism and discrimination in the underworld, females' reluctant to pursue illegal opportunities when available, and the criminogenic influence of masculinity and male peer groups specific to men (Cullen & Wilcox, 2015). Still, the significance of Freda Adler and her *Sisters in Crime* cannot be overstated. Two considerations are relevant.

First, Adler boldly stated a clear theory of female crime. Her perspective was rooted in status and role theory: Depending on their status in society, people are socialized into certain role expectations and have access to certain opportunities. As American society achieves more gender equality, men's and women's social experiences will converge. The result is that their choices in life will become more similar—whether this is to go to college, work as a police officer or corporate executive, play soccer, or engage in criminal behavior. This is a general theory of crime, not a gender-specific theory, because it sees the causes of crime as the same across gender groups. This theoretical paradigm remains important—in part because predictors of offending and recidivism are often similar for males and females (see, e.g., Moffitt et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2009).

Second, with the publication of *Sisters in Crime*—especially given its provocative thesis and national publicity—the topic of women and crime could no longer be ignored. Adler's ideas demanded to be read and tested. And they were—both in the short and long terms (see, e.g., Cullen et al., 1979; Lauritsen et al., 2009; Steffensmeier, 1978).

Rita Simon: *Women and Crime*

Rita James Simon was born in New York City on November 26, 1931. She had an illustrious academic journey, which started with her earning a bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1952 and a PhD in sociology from the University of Chicago in 1957. She reportedly published more than 60 books and 325 articles in a career that included appointments as a professor at the University of Illinois and as dean of the School of Justice at American University. She was the inaugural editor of *Justice Quarterly* (author Francis Cullen was her editorial successor). Similar to Freda Adler, she raised three children. She was married to Julian Simon, an economist noted for the "Simon-Ehrlich wager," which he won when, as he predicted, the prices of five metals—copper, chromium, nickel, tin, and tungsten—fell

over a decade (Simon, a free-market environmentalist, argued against scarcity and favored population growth). Rita Simon passed away in 2013 (“Julian Simon,” 2023; “Obituaries,” 2013; “Rita James Simon,” 2023).

Rita Simon published her classic *Women and Crime* in the same year that Adler’s *Sisters in Crime* appeared—1975. This fact is significant for two reasons. First, it reveals that events of the day were having the effect of directing scholars independently to write books with similar themes. Other investigations of female offending were emerging and more would follow shortly thereafter. Again, many of these were captured in *The Criminology of Deviant Women*, an edited volume by Adler and Simon in 1979. Second, it is instructive that *Women and Crime* and *Sisters in Crime* were written by *female criminologists* who were scholarly outliers at this time. Notably, both were senior scholars—Simon, a professor at the University of Illinois and Adler, an associate professor at Rutgers University. The field of women and crime likely was an inevitability—as it was in other disciplines. Still, in the United States, the publication of these two works was integral to the invention of the study of women and crime.

Each book represented the style of their authors. Adler’s volume had a title meant to send a message. *Sisters in Crime* modeled the name used previously by Clifford Shaw (1938) in *Brothers in Crime*, a “multiple life-history” of “five brothers, sons of an immigrant Polish family” in Chicago (Snodgrass, 1972, p. 151). Her subtitle was provocative in its claim: *The Rise of the New Female Criminal*. By contrast, Rita Simon preferred the heading of *Women and Crime*, with no subtitle affixed. The insides of the books could not have been more different. As noted, reflecting her personal style, Adler wrote flamboyantly, using evocative language and leaving the reader with the bold admonition to be on the lookout for the next generation of women criminals. Simon’s book, less than half the size (126 versus 287 pages), contained 51 tables. Her purpose was scientific—to allow the data to tell her story.

Simon’s and Adler’s take on female offending both converged and diverged. Like her sister in criminology, Simon (1975) pointed out that “female criminality in the United States ... has been almost completely ignored by criminologists, lawyers, penologists, and social scientists” (p. 1). And like Adler, she noted that those who had examined this phenomenon “have traced female criminality to biological and/or psychological sources” (p. 3). In doing so, they have overlooked what

sociology teaches, for they have given “little or no discussion of such social-structural considerations as the state of the economy, occupational and educational opportunities, divisions of labor based on sex roles, and differential associations” (p. 3).

Then there was the elephant in the room—what could not be ignored by two senior female sociological criminologists: The women’s movement was under way, which meant that the social-structural experiences of females were changing. And this transformation had potential consequences. “As a function both of expanded consciousness, as well as occupational opportunities,” Simon (1975) reasoned, “women’s participation, roles, and involvement in crime are expected to change and increase” (p. 2). Similar to Adler, Simon articulated the liberal feminist message best termed the *liberation thesis*:

If one assumes that the changes in women’s roles, in their perceptions of self, and in their desire for expanded horizons that began in the latter part of the sixties will not be abated, either by external events such as major economic depression or by internal processes whereby women examine their situations and decide that their happiness lies in the traditional pursuits of homemaking, wifely companionship, and motherhood, then we would expect that one of the major by-products of the women’s movement will be a higher proportion of women who pursue careers in crime. (p. 1)

Here, however, Simon parted ways with Adler. With some hubris, Adler’s claims were more strident and her predictions saw a “new female criminal” who would commit lots of offenses, pursuing “careers in burglary, larceny, auto theft, forgery, counterfeiting, and embezzling” (Adler, 1975, p. 248). Girls might join a delinquent gang, and those not much older might join a terrorist organization (pp. 248 and 249). By contrast, Simon narrowed her focus on labor market participation and on how it exerts differential effects on crime. Simon set forth two hypotheses.

First, Simon argued what might at first glance appear to be a counterintuitive thesis: Labor force participation should *decrease* violent crime. Why? Because, in essence, working should reduce criminogenic strains. The emotions that “stimulate women to violence” should diminish as they receive “more generous financial compensation.” These would include “their sense of frustration, their feelings of being victimized, and their sense of powerlessness” (p. 19).

Second, labor force participation should be expected to *increase* property crimes by providing more opportunities than homemaking for theft. But here was the rub. Despite increased employment, noted Simon (1975), “higher proportions of women today are represented in the traditionally female occupations than at any previous time” (p. 106). Sex-segregation in the workforce remained a stifling barrier. Female offending reflected this reality. The “statistics showed,” Simon pointed out, more women’s involvement in crime; however, it was concentrated not in violence but “in certain types of offenses”—“theft, forgery, fraud, and embezzlement” (p. 107):

As of 1972, 30 percent of all arrests for major larceny were women; 30 percent of all the arrests for fraud and embezzlement were women; and 25 percent of all forgery arrests were women. These proportions are not 50 percent, but they are least twice as high as they were for any other offense.... The fact that female arrests have increased for these offenses and not for all offenses is consistent both with opportunity theory and with the presence of a sizable women’s movement. (Simon, 1975, p. 107)

Simon then prognosticated the future, arguing that “if present trends continue, in twenty years women should be making a contribution in white-collar, financial crimes commensurate with their representation in society” (p. 107).

In retrospect, some changes predicted by Simon occurred, and others did not. Based on FBI arrest data, the percentage of females for various financial crimes crept upward but did not equal the level of men’s involvement. (We can report 2019 FBI data, which were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and prior to the FBI changing its data system that has experienced lower reporting rates by law enforcement agencies.) In 2019, for example, women’s percentages were as follows: larceny-theft (42.6%), forgery and counterfeiting (32.3%), and fraud (35.9%). But an important outlier consistent with Simon’s predictions must be noted: The percentage of women arrested for embezzlement was higher than that of men—50.2% to 49.8% (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2020).

Despite what Simon and Adler might have thought, research suggests that women infrequently commit high-level white-collar crimes, such as lucrative corporate frauds (Benson & Gottschalk, 2015; Dodge, 2016). Part of the challenge is that women are still excluded

from occupational positions where such criminal opportunities exist. Change has occurred but not as great as seemed possible at the time. However, other factors not anticipated by Simon and Adler in 1975 are also important. In their study of corporate frauds, Steffensmeier et al. (2013) found that women often were not part of networks (“conspiracy groups”) that undertook the criminal enterprise. They tended to be included in a subordinate role only if they had a close relationship with a male conspirator or occupied a financial position that was a needed gateway to the fraud. Furthermore, Steffensmeier and colleagues argue that men’s and women’s socialization equip them with gendered “focal concerns” that are differentially conducive to crime. Thus, women are socialized to an ethic of care, value social relationships, and are risk-averse in business ventures—all of which inhibit crimes that hurt others. By contrast, men embrace masculine qualities of competition, achievement, status, and risky ventures. “By extension,” conclude Steffensmeier et al. (2013), “men find it easier than women to justify illegal wrongdoing because law-violating behavior, especially for status-seeking or financial reasons, is more compatible with male focal concerns” (p. 452).

A half-century after being set forth, Simon’s and Adler’s ideas linking the nature of social roles to involvement in crime remain important theoretically and empirically. From the first appearance of their classic books, their work captured widespread attention and proceeded to be of enduring significance. Two other scholars also would contribute to building a sturdy foundation on which the study of women and crime could rise upward.

Carol Smart: *Women, Crime and Criminology*

In 1973, Ian Taylor, Paul Walton, and Jock Young (1973) published *The New Criminology: For a Social Theory of Deviance*. With the exception of Ruth Kornhauser’s (1978) *Social Sources of Delinquency: An Appraisal of Analytic Models* and perhaps David Matza’s (1969) *Becoming Deviant*, no work in that era—and arguably since—offered such a penetrating and comprehensive assessment of extant theories of crime and deviance (see, however, Currie, 1974). The genius of Taylor et al.’s masterpiece was the consistency with which it used a critical framework to show the limitations of then-current theorizing. They called for scholars to undertake a true social analysis in which crime and its control by the state were situated in the historical and prevailing

political economy. They stopped short of setting forth a substantive theory of wayward behavior, but did present a blueprint for subsequent scholars to use in this task. *The New Criminology* is credited in being a major force in igniting interest in critical criminology not only in their home of the United Kingdom but also in the United States.

The New Criminology is of relevance because Carol Smart's *Women, Crime and Criminology: A Feminist Critique* was published in this British intellectual context four years later in 1977. Smart received her master's in criminology and doctorate in socio-legal studies (in 1983) at the University of Sheffield where the late Ian Taylor, the lead author of *The New Criminology*, was one of her lecturers (Walklate, 2010). In fact, he would be among those Smart (1977) acknowledged in her book for their "critical and constructive comments on various stages of my manuscript" (p. xi). Not surprisingly, Smart would, like Taylor and his colleagues, call for a *new feminist criminology*.

She dreamed that this perspective might "take its place alongside the ranks of New, Critical, Radical and Working-Class Criminologies" (p. 182). To her dismay, however, this had not occurred, for "feminist criminology is significantly absent from the above list" (p. 182). Indeed, terms such as feminism, gender, patriarchy, sex, and women do not appear in *The New Criminology's* Subject Index. Women remain invisible in the book's pages. "It is quite clear," lamented Smart (1977), "that these criminologies do not include a feminist perspective or even a more serious consideration of female offenders than the traditional 'old' criminologies" (p. 182). As Leonard (1982) notes, "Taylor, Walton, and Young's massive criticism of criminology (1973) does not contain *one word* about women" (p. 176, emphasis in original). Smart's *Women, Crime and Criminology* intended to change this state of affairs.

Remarkably, Smart began this book "as a postgraduate dissertation which I wrote for a Master's degree in criminology" (p. xiii). Smart noted that it was during this time that she "became aware of the overwhelming lack of interest in female criminality displayed by established criminologists and deviancy theorists" (p. xiii). Worse, when women were studied, the theorizing was sexist. Like Adler and Simon, she excoriated early theories "for basing their accounts of female criminality ... upon a particular (mis)conception of the innate character and nature of women, which is in turn founded upon a biological determinist position" (p. 27). Most thinking during her time fared no better, in her estimate. Whether classic or contemporary, theories were

marked, she stated, by “the total neglect of any critical analysis of the common-sense perceptions of female criminality” (p. 3).

Similar to Taylor et al. in *The New Criminology*, Smart’s project was to supply such a critical analysis to all aspects of women and crime—from offending to sexual victimization to corrections (for a summary, see Van Gundy-Yoder, 2010). We will give one example that highlights her feminist approach: her critique of role theory.

First, although her book was written without benefit of the contemporaneously published works of Adler (1975) and Simon (1975), she offered a critique of the perspective informing their work: a role-theory explanation of female offending. Smart (1977) admitted that there was a kernel of truth in this perspective. It was probable, she observed, that girls are less involved in delinquency because of “socialization patterns, in particular the greater restrictions placed on the freedom of movement of most girls” (p. 68). She was at one with the Adler-Simon perspective that opportunities matter. Thus, she argued that focusing on a “lack of access to illegitimate opportunity structures for adolescent girls and women is of course a most perceptive insight into an understanding of female criminality” (p. 68). So far, so good.

But a theory of gender-role differentiation, Smart (1977) asserted, cannot “provide a complete analysis of the phenomenon” (p. 69). Two crucial limitations mark this reasoning. The first is the origins of these sex-role differences in socialization and opportunity. According to Smart, there is a need to “situate the discussion of sex roles within a structural explanation of the social origins of those roles” (p. 69). This task involves explaining “the socially inferior nature of women’s status and position in historical, economic or cultural terms”—in short, through the lens of feminism (p. 69). Role theorists must challenge this inequality, lest they give fuel to the belief that women’s subordinate place in society is “natural” or “biologically determined” (p. 69).

The second limitation is the tendency to focus on how gender roles lead women to be “socialized into primarily conforming patterns of behaviour”—despite the fact that “a considerable number engage in crime” (p. 69). This focus on explaining conformity means that “role theory fails to discuss motivation or intention as an integral part of female criminality” (p. 69). Accounts of women’s offending turn to two problematic options: (1) poor or unsuccessful socialization or (2) role-frustration. Blaming poor socialization assumes, uncritically, the existence of an ideal into which all women should be socialized. A feminist approach would be more critical, as Smart (1977) stated:

The “poor socialization” thesis is based on a belief in an ordered consensual social order in which the interests of the individual or minority group are synonymous with those of the whole society or more appropriately the ruling order. Poor socialization as an explanation of female deviance implies a pathology existing within the individual which requires treatment rather than a conception of deviance as a structurally produced conflict situation. (p. 69)

The “frustration thesis” fares no better in Smart’s view. This explanation sees crime as a source of relief. A key issue left unaddressed is why frustration stemming from “limiting sex roles” leads to crime when relief could be achieved through “legitimate channels” (e.g., employment and political activism) (p. 70; see Cullen, 1984). “Frustration tends to be a ‘catch-all’ explanation,” concludes Smart (1977), “which, because it seems to be employed to explain anything, actually explains nothing” (p. 70).

The critical analysis of role theory led Smart to take issue with the collateral claim that the women’s movement would increase female criminal involvement. She captured the premise in this way:

One assumption that is implicit in the role theorist’s account of female criminality is that, as women’s roles change and become more open to the opportunities and tensions associated with the male role, more women will engage more frequently in crime. (p. 70)

Smart then made a brilliant observation. The liberation perspective assumes that emancipation will lead women to become like men and follow them into crime. But this is a shallow understanding of what liberation might entail. “The extension of human rights and full social and economic opportunities,” Smart (1977) argued, “is not merely based on a desire to emulate men but on the achievement of social justice” (p. 73). “Emancipation,” she continued, “is not synonymous with the ‘freedom’ to be like a man, it refers to the ability to resist stereotyped sex roles and to reject limiting preconceptions about the inherent capabilities of the sexes.”

Smart also suggested that scholars have a shallow understanding of social movements. In this case, the women’s movement not only instigated changes but also was itself “the outcome of economic, political and historical changes and processes” (p. 74). The movement was made possible because many females were dissatisfied with their

“inferior social position and lack of legitimate opportunities” (p. 74). As Smart (1977) noted, “the Movement does not simply cause dissatisfactions, it is often the expression of existing and experienced injustices and inequalities” (p. 74).

Women and girls who turn to crime may not embrace liberation ideology; indeed, many from the working classes typically do not. This fact does not mean that they lack consciousness about the restrictions they face due to sexist stereotypes or blocked opportunities. Smart contended that their “changes in consciousness are as likely to be caused by changing material conditions as by the principles of the Women’s Movement” (p. 74). For example, women may enter the job market if a demand for labor exists due to a shortage of male workers or to an economic boom.

Women, Crime and Criminology is replete with feminist analyses of this sort. Her analysis of rape, for example, is especially compelling, noting that it is a crime of power, encouraged by what we now call “rape myths” and rooted in the subordinate position of women in society. All this brilliance aside, the book’s final chapter is unfulfilling. Like *The New Criminology*, Smart deferred on articulating a substantive feminist theory of crime and social control. Similar to Taylor et al. (who enumerated seven formal “requirements for a fully social theory of deviance”; 1973, pp. 269 and 270), the best she could do was to list five “specific areas in which research is necessary”: the nature of female crime; how police, probation officers, and social workers perceived wayward women; how women are treated in the courts; how women are treated in prisons; and “the structure and purpose of criminal laws” (p. 184).

We are not alone in voicing this disappointment. Leonard (1982) highlights Smart’s missed opportunity: “She might have synthesized various insights regarding women and crime that are found throughout her book, including ideas on the political inequality of men and women, and the stabilizing function of the family in capitalist society” (p. 12). In an otherwise positive review, Peters (1978) notes that the book’s “most notable weakness” stems from “its author’s reluctance to do anything more than hint at what she would like to see in a new theory” (p. 88). But developing a vibrant feminist theory of crime would not register a place on her subsequent scholarly agenda. As Susan Walklate (2010) notes, Smart turned her attention to “the sociology of the family, how the law influences our personal lives, and why it is that people turn to the law to solve their personal problems” (p. 278). She spent her career

at the Universities of Warwick, Leeds, and Manchester, holding various administrative posts (Walklate, 2010). At last report, she was a Professor Emeritus at the University of Manchester (“Carol Smart,” 2023).

Still, Carol Smart played a special role in inventing the field of women and crime. In particular, she ensured that this area would be called “feminist criminology.” It is instructive that in compiling the biographies of the *Fifty Key Thinkers in Criminology*, Keith Hayward et al. (2010) included Carol Smart in this honored roster. Freda Adler and Rita Simon did not make the list.

Eileen Leonard: *Women, Crime, and Society*

Eileen B. Leonard received her PhD in sociology from Fordham University, where she studied under the noted social theorist Werner Stark. In the acknowledgments section in *Women, Crime, and Society: A Critique of Theoretical Criminology*, she referred to Stark as her “mentor” and noted that “his own research and his consistent encouragement of my research have provided me with a sterling example of both friendship and scholarship” (1982, p. xv). In 1975, Leonard joined the faculty of Vassar College, a highly selective liberal arts school located in Poughkeepsie, New York. She retired as an Emeritus Professor nearly a half-century later in 2020, having held various administrative positions during her tenure (“Eileen Leonard,” 2023).

For years, she taught “Gender, Social Problems, and Social Change” at Taconic Correctional Facility, a local medium/minimum-security women’s prison—a class that included Vassar students and inmates (“Eileen Leonard,” 2023). In 2009, she received the prison’s “Volunteer of the Year Award” (“Faculty Accomplishments 09–10,” 2010). A “Rate My Professors” report for her on-campus courses indicates her commitment to the teaching enterprise. She received a rating of 4.8 on a five-point scale; 22 of the students rated her as “5–Awesome,” whereas the other three rated her as “4–Great.” Keywords described her repeatedly as “awesome,” “caring,” “inspirational,” and “respected.” Here is an illustrative comment:

Prof. Leonard is incredible! Everyone says you must take a class with her before you graduate, this is true. Her teaching style is inclusive, supportive, and she facilitates great discussion.... Everything she has to say is interesting. Kindest person ever, she is the best. (Rate My Professors, 2023)