**Feminism**

Feminist approaches are many and varied but all, to varying extents, focus on women as both **offenders** and **victims** - partly as a response to what **Sharp** (2006) suggests has been the male bias of traditional criminological research and partly because "the study of crime became equated with the study of male criminality". Feminist criminology attempts to redress this "**malestream bias**" in two ways: firstly, by confronting the conventional wisdom of greater male involvement in crime - what **Maguire** (2002) argues is a "universal feature...of all modern countries" - and secondly by exploring the reasons for female criminality. In this respect, knowledge of female offending is largely based around two main sources, **official crime statistics** and **offender surveys**, **and** we can use these as a way of exploring feminist criminology and explanations for female offending

**Statistical accuracy**

**Official crime statistics** consistently show men, in terms of raw numbers, have greater involvement in crime than women. **Self and Zealey** (2007), however, make the important point that males and females commit similar **types**of crime; theft, drug offences andpersonal violence being the main offencesfor *both* sexes.

From a feminist standpoint these observations are interesting, mainly because most explanations for crime have focused on explaining male criminality by using women as a form of **control group**; where women are considered more likely to conform to social norms the criminological focus is switched to the search for the attributes - biological, psychological and sociological - not shared by women and which supposedly explain male criminality.

An example here is the notion of males and females having different attitudes to **risk-taking** which, in turn, explains greater or lesser involvement in crime. In basic terms, risk-taking is bound-up with cultural ideas about masculinity while conformity is held to be a cultural feature of femininity. **McIvor** (1998), for example, argues greater male involvement in youth crime is ‘linked to a range of other risk-taking behaviours which in turn are associated with the search for [masculine] identity in the transition from adolescence to adulthood’. **Lyng's** (1990, 2004) concept of **edgework** also argues many young males are attracted to crime precisely because of the risks involved; risk-taking affirms their masculinity.

One objection here is that women are defined **negatively** in such theories, "by the absence" of something men have (a need to take risks) rather than as individuals in their own right. A second objection involves an **ecological fallacy**; while many women are not involved in crime the same is true for men - yet significant numbers of each do offend. Some feminists have, therefore, argued that female involvement in all forms of crime coupled with contemporary increases in female criminality point towards the need to develop alternative explanations based around the different ways male and female lives are structured.

Different **opportunity structures**, for example,reflect different forms of participation in the *public* and *private* domains. **Davies** (1997) argues the general structure of female lives, involving greater participation in the private sphere of the home, gives women fewer *opportunities* for crime. Where men and women have *similar* opportunity structures, their respective crime patterns are very similar. **Shoplifting**, for example, is one area where, according to **McMillan** (2004), ‘women almost equal men in the official statistics’. Fraud, on the other hand, is a predominantly male crime - something that reflects their higher positions in the workplace.

**Statistical inaccuracy?**

A second strand to feminist criminology questions the **validity** of official crime statistics in relation to female criminality and calls into question the validity of theories of criminality based on an interpretation of such statistics. Evidence from **self-report studies** showing far higher levels of female offending suggests official crime statistics both **overestimate** male criminality and **underestimate** female offending - something that has significant consequences for any explanation of gendered criminality.

One possible explanation for the underestimation female offending is that the police and judiciary have institutionally **stereotyped**views about male and female criminality; where men are seen as ‘real criminals’ the police are less likely to suspect or arrest female offenders and the courts show greater leniency towards women - a **chivalry effect** suggested by **Pollack** (1950). **Klein** (1996), however, argues any such effect has been overstated and **Carlen et al.** (1985) argue for a different interpretation. Where strong gender **stereotypes** pervade the criminal justice system those who do not fit **gendered assumptions** about male and female roles and responsibilities receive **harsher**treatment than those who do.

A different form of stereotyping involves the **medicalisation** of female deviance, something that reflects, **Busfield** (1996) argues, the increasing perception while "Men are bad, women are mad". In this respect female offending is redefined as **illness**; both physical and as a ‘psychological cry for help’. **Easteal** (1991), for example, documents instances in Britain and America where *premenstrual tension* has been used to explain different types of female criminality, something that for **Klein** (1996) represents an extension of how ‘femaleness’ has a long cultural association with ‘nature’ and ‘biology’. **Easteal** notes, however, that many feminists have objected to this medicalisation process because it ‘reinforces the view of women as slaves to their hormones’.

**Evaluation**

The underestimation of female offending can be criticised in two ways: **Maguire** (2002), for example, argues the statistical evidence suggests no great reservoir of ‘undiscovered female crime’ – there is "little or no evidence of a vast shadowy underworld of female deviance hidden in our midst like the sewers below the city streets".

A second criticism argues **self-report studies** of female offending arepotentially **unreliable**. Where such surveys are largely based on the behaviour of **young women** (those statistically most likely to be offenders) and extrapolated to all women the result is an overestimation of female offending. If true, this criticism supports the claim that theories of female offending and conformity that flow from official crime statistics do give us a broadly **valid** picture of female behaviour.

**Left Realism**

Young (2003) suggests the job of realism is "to tackle all three sides of the deviancy process" - a three-cornered approach that addresses the multidimensional nature of crime in terms of the relationship between offender, victim and social reactions. Only by understanding their interaction - how each impacts on the other - that we can understand crime as both a private problem, in terms of its effects on victims, and a public issue - how it impacts on the quality of community life.

In terms of offenders, profiling suggests most crime is committed by young, working-class males. Although there may be areas of overrepresentation (black youths, for example) and underrepresentation (such as middle-class or female criminality), crime statistics are considered broadly valid – there is not, for example, a vast reservoir of undetected ‘crimes of the elderly’. Lea and Young (1984) suggest three related factors that influence offending: relative deprivation, marginalisation and subculture.

• Relative deprivation refers to how someone sees themselves in relation to others and Lea and Young use this concept because "deprivation alone cannot cause criminality"; many poor people do not commit crimes. In addition, relative deprivation means crimes committed by the affluent can be included in any explanation of offending. A millionaire may see themselves as relatively deprived compared to a billionaire.

• Marginalisation relates to status and, as Willis (1977) has shown, young, working-class men are frequently ‘pushed to the margins of society’ through educational failure, unemployment and low-status work. A further aspect of (political) marginalisation is the idea no-one is listening to the problems faced by marginalised youth.

• Subcultural groups give substance to feelings of relative deprivation and marginalisation because they give them collective expression. Where working-class youths accept the materialist values of capitalist society, they engage in criminal behaviour – the pursuit of desired ends by illegitimate means. ‘Subcultural-type groupings’ are not restricted to the young and lower class – middle-class company directors who deal illegally in shares or fix prices to defraud the public may have their behaviour supported by a (sub)culture that sees such behaviour as permissible.

These ideas come together, Young (2011) argues, in something like the 2011 English riots: "The background of urban riots is almost formulaic. A substantial section of the population [subculture] who are economically excluded [relative deprivation], a situation of political marginalisation where there is no party or politician to speak for them and, then, the final straw, an act of police injustice – real or perceived".

Finally, Left Realism focuses on how different social relationships (between police and public, offender and victim, and so forth) create different social reactions and solutions to "the problem of crime" (discussed in Section 5). The form of these reactions is specified by Young (1997) in terms of the "square of crime" - how, for example, the police view ‘potential and actual offenders’ and how the latter view their relationship with control agencies, contributes to how crime is perceived, performed and prevented. The relationship between formal control agencies and offenders is further mediated by how the general public as informal control agents view both offenders and their victims. Where offender or victim can’t be easily identified, for example, public reactions may be muted (or uncooperative), which may hinder police attempts to control a particular type of offending (as may occur with complicated and opaque forms of white-collar/business crime).

**Evaluation**

Criticism of Left realism has focused on two main areas. Firstly, the central concepts of the "three-cornered approach" have each been questioned; relative deprivation is a "catch-all" category that can be applied to explain almost any behaviour, concepts of "marginalisation" are similarly vague - its existence can only be "predicted after the event"; evidence of political marginalisation is inferred once an offender has been identified - a methodological approach that lends itself to the cherry-picking of evidence to support an argument. Interactionist and postmodern approaches have also questioned the usefulness of subculture as both a concept and its usefulness in explaining young male criminality. If subcultural groupings do not exist in the form specified by Left realism - if they are simply very loose gatherings rather than tight-knit groupings - this raises questions about the theoretical basis of the three-cornered approach.

Secondly, criticism has focused on a too-ready acceptance of conventional definitions of crime. Feminists such as Smart (1990) argue the focus on narrow legal definitions and a too-ready acceptance of official crime statistics - at a time when both their reliability (see below) and validity has been questioned, exaggerates the significance of low-level street crime and downplays wider questions of harm, particularly as this idea relates to male violence against women.