

Women, Crime and Imprisonment in the Past

Women are responsible for a smaller proportion of indictable offences than men: approximately 13% of all prosecutions in Europe (*European sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics 2010*, 195). This strong gender difference in criminal behaviour is generally linked to differences in the public lives of men and women: the fact that women have lesser freedom and fewer opportunities may cause a lower participation by women in crime, and may also lead to more lenient treatment by prosecutors. Furthermore, scholars generally assume that such sex differences in recorded crime rates are consistent, stressing the continuity of men's excessive contribution to criminality rather than any change.

However, data on early modern Europe show that in France, England and the Netherlands between 1600 and 1800 women played a much more prominent role in crime than in the 20th century. Such data reveal that women's involvement was not limited to distinctively female offences such as infanticide, witchcraft and prostitution. Women also constituted a large part of the cases that are typically associated with male crime, such as property offences and violence. There are clear indications that between 1600 and 1900, 20 to 50% of property crimes (like theft and receiving) were committed by women. In contrast: in the 20th century women were responsible for only 12% of the property crimes (*European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics*, 2010, 67-68).

In the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, imprisonment became the most important punishment for serious offences committed by both men and women. The earliest prisons were established in England and the Netherlands. Amsterdam established a house of correction especially for women in 1597: a workhouse (*Spinhuis*) in which female beggars and criminals were put at work and forced to spin. Women who had committed less serious crimes, such as fighting and disorderly behaviour, were often confined (on water and bread) for a few weeks or months only. Those who were accused of theft, serious assault, fornication, adultery, and prostitution were imprisoned for a longer period of time. These institutions were far from healthy: 19th century reports about Dutch prisons concluded that in some prisons (such as Gouda) many women confined died because of diseases and food scarcity.

Women constituted a large part of the prison institutions, at least in Holland in the early modern period (1600-1800). The high percentages of female crime and prisoners in the 17th and 18th centuries have led to an academic debate about trends in male and female recorded crime. Using data from several European cities, the criminologist Feeley argued that – as a result of increasing patriarchal structures – the female percentage in crime declined dramatically during the 19th century. Other scholars have raised substantial doubts about the idea of the 'vanishing female'. Peter King and Manon van der Heijden maintained that the English and the Dutch evidence points to long-term stability in female recorded crime in the 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries rather than to a long-term decline.

More quantitative and comparative data on the period between 1600 and 1900 are needed to determine the changing nature of recorded male and female crime. The research project *Crime and Gender: A Comparative Perspective 1600-1900* undertakes a long-term comparative analysis that links gender differences in recorded crime to contrasts in public lives led by men and women in England, Germany, Italy, France and the Netherlands. This project, supported by a VICI grant from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, will do so in various subprojects, for which data collection has recently started in the Netherlands, England, Bologna and Frankfurt. Manon van der Heijden, project leader, recently published a well-received book aimed at the general public: 'Misdadige vrouwen' [Criminal women']. For more information, see www.crimeandgender.nl.