

The outlook: Equal treatment, equal protection

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times for women. Nevertheless, women are still less likely than men to be sent to prison. And if they do go to one of the few female institutions, they will find that there are fewer training and rehabilitation opportunities than in men's institutions, although the living conditions also tend to be less severe.

How, then, do we make sense of this changing situation? Several factors have to be considered, including traditional societal sex roles and their supporting stereotypes. These sex roles have had a strong impact upon the ideologies and practices of those who attempt to control crime.

THE TRADITIONAL activities for women in our society have revolved around the wife-mother and sex-object roles. In the past, female involvement in crime has been seen as an outgrowth of these roles.

A woman might have been a shoplifter, child abuser or prostitute and was probably motivated by her relationships with men, emotional instabilities or sexual maladjustments. It was assumed that such traditional roles provided the framework as well as the restraining factors for female participation in criminal activities.

It is within this cultural background that citizens and criminal justice personnel responded to female criminals. Witnesses and victims of female crime were hesitant to take action against women because they felt women needed society's protection and probably were not particularly dangerous anyway.

Similarly, police exercised more discretion when they encountered a woman in criminal activities. They seldom brought her in or charged her with an offense. Courts also tended to be lenient with the relatively few women who appeared before them.

THIS PATERNALISTIC and preferential treatment had its costs, however.

Throughout the criminal justice system, "a fallen woman" often experienced discriminatory, severe treatment. For example, prostitutes were regularly rounded up and treated with disdain; rape victims were embarrassed and humiliated.

These same themes and stereotypes were embodied in the scant social science studies on women and crime until very recently. Many writers from a variety of disciplines offered social, economic, political and psychological explanations of male involvement in criminal activities, but the few social scientists who focused on females emphasized primarily biological and/or psychological factors.

Women involved in crime were

either maladjusted psychologically, inferior biologically, or had failed to adjust to the expectations surrounding traditional roles. These ideas prevailed until the 1970s.

THE WOMEN'S movement that began in the late 1960s has had at least an indirect impact on crime and sex roles. The movement has resulted in increased awareness and sensitivity to changing sex roles on the part of the general public, criminal justice personnel and women themselves.

There have been pressures for official agencies to alter their policies and practices, and there is some evidence this is happening. For example, sociologist Rita Simon interviewed police, prosecutors and others in the criminal justice system, discovering this recurrent theme:

"If it's equality these women want, we'll see that they get it."

If, indeed, this attitude is reflected in official behavior, then we would expect there would be some decline in preferential treatment for women in the criminal justice system. We could surmise, then, that some of the increase in reported female crime could be accounted for by these changes in official policies.

HOWEVER, THESE same changes will mean that equal protection will increase, and that the often degrading and discriminatory treatment of women will decline.

We can speculate about other changes in sex roles and their impact on patterns of crime. For example, close to 50 per cent of all women participate in the labor force, and increasing numbers are pursuing higher education.

However, the majority of women still are employed in relatively low status clerical and service occupations and are not compensated for their labors commensurate with their training. Nevertheless, women are increasingly involved in activities similar to those of men.

SOME SOCIAL scientists believe that expanded roles for women will influence the motivations and opportunities for female involvement in crime. Females will acquire aspirations, expectations and experiences beyond traditional roles—both legitimate and illegitimate.

Women will learn about the financial world, firearms, physical force and other heretofore exclusively male realms. Their move into a wider variety of occupational and social roles will provide the necessary settings and opportunities for criminal activities, even the motivation and skills for violent crime.

However, these changes are bound to be slow and will probably not result

in dramatic increases in total female crime.

This means that when women are so inclined, they will not have to depend on their relationships with men to

enter, participate in or direct their criminal activity.

In the future we can expect a gradual increase in female participation in a wider range of criminal activities. At the same time, as our value system

changes, some predominantly female crimes such as prostitution probably will be decriminalized.

Another long-term effect of changing sex roles will be the increased propor-

tions of women entering occupations in the criminal justice system. Already, cities are hiring more policewomen; more female lawyers are practicing law, and women judges are becoming less of a curiosity.

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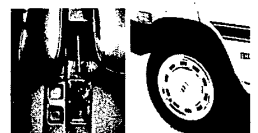
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