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Long-Term Trends in Gender and Crime

ABSTRACT

Recent historical work on long-term trends in gendered crime patterns challenges widely held beliefs that women commit much smaller proportions of crimes than men and that female participation in crime has always been comparatively small. Since the 1990s, data from historical work are consistent with the conventional wisdom. Women constituted only 15 percent of people prosecuted for crimes in Europe in recent years, and 13 percent of those were convicted. In the United States, 27 percent of arrestees in 2022 were women; the percentages for violent and other serious crimes were much lower. Historical data from Europe before 1800, however, paint a very different picture. Women's relative participation in crimes, including theft and violence, was much higher, often reaching 50 percent of prosecuted property crimes. Recent empirical and theoretical work explores reasons why women's involvement in crime has become substantially lower than in earlier times and demonstrates various ways changing cultural expectations, legal practices, and socioeconomic conditions have shaped gendered crime patterns over time. Factors such as urbanization, moral norms, family systems, labor force participation, and welfare arrangements largely determined variation in female crime rates in western Europe.

Criminologists generally assume that women are responsible for a much smaller proportion of recorded offenses than men and that women's small

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contribution to crime has remained stable over time. Data in the most recent *European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics* (Aebi et al. 2021a) show that women make up 15 percent of prosecuted persons in Europe and 13 percent of convicted persons. In 1995, the percentages of females among suspected, prosecuted, and convicted persons were even lower. For example, on average about 13 percent of the suspected offenders of theft were women, even though theft is the crime most often committed by women (Aebi et al. 2021a, p. 73). American arrest data for 2022 reveal similar differences: 27 percent of people arrested overall were women; the female percentages for the most serious offenses were smaller (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2023, table 14). It is therefore not surprising that the authors of the 2021 edition of the *European Sourcebook* conclude that “traditionally, women commit less crimes than men and so they are underrepresented in the conviction population” (Aebi et al. 2021b, p. 11). The low recent levels of participation in crime have led many criminologists and historians to believe that women’s comparatively small contribution to recorded crime is a given, as evident in the past as in the present.

This general assumption has important consequences for the study of crime and gender. Most contemporary criminological theories, on the assumption that there is little variation over time in the proportions and types of female criminality, focus on explanations for women’s small share of crime. This static image has existed since the late nineteenth century; scholars have offered various explanations. In the late nineteenth century, biological factors were seen as crucial. Influential scholars such as Lombroso and Ferrero (1893) concluded that women were more conservative and law-abiding than men, because ovulation was a less active process than the release of sperm. This suggested to them that women were less likely to commit crimes. Sociologists, responding to biological determinism, attributed differences between male and female crime to their different social positions. Loosjes ([1894] 2010), for example, argued that women have less opportunity and motivation to commit certain crimes because of their education and the ways they are nurtured.

Social explanations for sex differences in criminality became popular in the 1970s and 1980s as scholars began to distinguish between sex and gender (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988). In short, the distinction is that sex is biological and gender is social. Research on sex differences takes crime differences between men and women to be products of interactions between biological determinants and contextual factors. The combination

of nature and nurture is used to explain the differences. Research on gender differences assumes that differences between men and women are to be explained by social forces and by differential treatment of boys and men compared with girls and women. Studies focus on the influence of historical, cultural, and social processes on men's and women's positions and social behavior. Frances Heidensohn proposed a gendered sociology of crime on the basis that differences between male and female criminality can be understood only when the effects of social control on women's lives and notions about deviant behavior are taken into account (Heidensohn 1985).

Gender studies has become an influential school in criminological and historical research, but it has hardly changed the static image of women's criminality (Van der Heijden 2016*b*). Studies that pay attention to female offending over the centuries focus mostly on violent offenses and seldom include historical findings on women's involvement in recorded property crimes (Gartner 2012). Much of the criminology literature remains focused on explaining men's crime and pays little attention to variation in the share of women's crime and in the types of crime they have committed over time (e.g., Burkhead 2006; Wilczak 2022). Women remain underrepresented in studies on crime and criminal justice.

Criminal statistics on Europe since 1900 demonstrate women's recent contributions to crime, but it would be wrong to conclude that women's roles in crime have always been insignificant. Historical data on Europe before 1800 show that women played a much more prominent role in crime in various western European countries than in the twentieth century (Van der Heijden 2016*b*, 2020). Their crimes were not limited to "traditional" female offenses, such as witchcraft, prostitution, and infanticide. Women were involved in crimes that are typically associated with men, such as property offenses and violence. There are clear indications in France, England, Scotland, Germany, and the Netherlands between 1600 and 1900 that 20 to 50 percent of property crimes (theft and burglary) were committed by women (Farge 1974; Beattie 1986; Schwerhoff 1991; Kilday 2007; Van der Heijden 2016*b*). These historical findings demonstrate variation in women's participation in crime over time and space.

In this essay, I discuss trends in and explanations for variation in gendered patterns of crime between 1600 and 2000. It is important to note that the historical evidence I discuss is primarily based on records of the prosecution of crime. My principal argument is that there is a widely shared

misconception about continuity in the proportion of recorded female crime and the types of crime women commit. The contemporary belief that women have always been less involved in crime than men is wrong.

Here is how this essay is organized. Section I discusses methodological problems in measuring crime and gender in the past. The various theories on gender and crime are the focus of section II. In section III, I discuss the historical debate on the decline in female crime after about 1800. Malcolm Feeley's (Feeley and Little 1991; Feeley 1994) arguments in "The Vanishing Female" were accepted by many historians, but research in the last decade has shown that the decline occurred later than Feeley proposed and that a posited link between industrialization and a decline in female crime is not supported by the evidence. The fourth section elaborates on variations in gender patterns in crime and differences between European regions between 1500 and 1900. Factors such as urbanization, moral norms, family systems, labor force participation, and welfare arrangements largely determined variation in female crime rates. My focus is limited to Europe because much less information about recorded female crime is available in the United States before 1900. Section V briefly examines patterns in gender and crime since 1900 and includes findings from the US. American criminal-justice statistics seem to suggest an increase in women's contribution to minor assaults, but there is no clear consensus among scholars about interpretation of the data and whether apparent increases in crime by women are real or result from changing policies and practices.

I. Measuring Gender Patterns in Crime

Finding solid source materials and quantitative data on crime patterns in the past is much more difficult than obtaining contemporary statistical data. Historians studying long-term trends in homicide have extensively debated the availability of judicial sources, the lack of consistent recording of crime, huge differences in definitions of crime, and problems in interpreting source material (Schwerhoff 2002; Spierenburg 2012; Eisner 2003; Knepper 2016). It is even more difficult to obtain hard data on women's criminality.

Feminist historians have been critical about the quantitative research methods used by many crime historians (Van der Heijden and Schmidt 2018). Quantification of criminal behavior produces low numbers of female crimes. Critics argue that the focus on statistical data marginalized

women and their involvement in premodern crime. As historian Garthine Walker stated: “What tends to happen is that women are counted, and being a minority of offenders, are subsequently *discounted* as unimportant” (Walker 2003, p. 4). Walker argued that the types of sources used to quantify female crime not only resulted in an underestimation, but also led to incorrect interpretations of the role of women in crime and inadequate indications of the types of crime they committed. Gender historians especially pleaded for integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches, application of other methodologies, such as microhistory, and examination of a broader range of sources (Arnot and Osborne 2003; Van der Heijden 2013).

Quantitative research methods are particularly problematic for historians of crime and gender, because it is especially difficult to obtain statistically significant data on women. Crime historians look at recorded crime or use statistical data to determine the number and proportions of women’s crime, but such sources reveal only a fraction of women’s criminal activity. Women in earlier centuries were less likely than men to be accused and convicted because of the principle of *feme covert*, according to which women were legally subordinate to their husbands and taken less seriously in court cases (Zedner 1991*a*; Walker 2003; Kilday 2007; Smith 2014). Social scientists can attempt to solve the well-known problems of the “dark number” and underreporting in our time by using other sources such as interviews and self-reporting. Historians, particularly those examining periods before 1800, have fewer sources available to them (Smith 2014; Williams and Godfrey 2018). In addition, a large part of crime remained undetected and unrecorded in earlier times because of far less developed police systems and lack of investigative methods. Until the nineteenth century, certain crimes were dealt with through financial agreements or by use of fines and were never recorded in the administration of the public prosecutor. Personal relations, social networks, and socioeconomic position played an important role in prosecution, conviction, and punishment. Such factors led to highly biased outcomes in terms of social class and gender. For example, in premodern Europe, both men and women were forbidden to have sexual relations outside marriage, but men could often redeem their sexual offenses; women rarely could (Van der Heijden 2016*a*; Schmidt 2020). For most European cities coroners’ reports, sentences, and examinations are available after the Middle Ages, but available source materials have important limitations when attempting to determine male and female crime rates.

The diversity of judicial systems in Europe before 1800 is another important factor that results in scattered information on women’s crime. In

addition to criminal courts controlled by magistrates, in many places churches, neighborhood organizations, and other civic institutions had authority to try cases and impose sentences (Vermeesch, Van der Heijden, and Zuijderduijn 2019). The coexistence of various legal systems, as well as different legal infrastructures, including formal, semiformal, and informal forums of conflict settlement, is often referred to as “legal pluralism” (Van der Heijden and Vermeesch 2019). In Europe between 1500 and 1800, people could opt for various forms of civil and criminal justice. The filing of a complaint was but one of many possibilities for making oneself heard in a conflict that started outside of the courts. German historians particularly have argued that the early modern justice system was an instrument of social control as well as an agent of moral discipline (Eibach 2003; Dinges 2004; Schwerhoff 2004). Judicial institutions were not only instruments in the hands of authorities, but also instruments of people using the judicial system to settle personal conflicts or impose social norms. As a result, the types of crime handled, and the kinds of people prosecuted by the courts, were as much determined by the authorities and private plaintiffs as by the mostly urban population.

Secular and ecclesiastical authorities may have established rules and formulated laws, but the numbers of cases they dealt with largely depended on the willingness of the population to bring conflicts to them (Castan 1980; Farge 1986; Shoemaker 1991; Garnot 2000; Van der Heijden 2012). Shoemaker’s (1991) study of seventeenth-century London and Middlesex and examinations of the early modern Low Countries have revealed that most people preferred to settle their conflicts outside the criminal courts or to bring their cases to lower and more accessible courts (Grey 2009; Vermeesch 2015; Van der Heijden 2016*a*). Various studies have shown that between about 1500 and 1900 women featured more prominently in lesser courts (Frank 1996; Knafla 1983; Jones 2006; King 2006; Grey 2009). Recent research on violence and urban justice in Holland between 1600 and 1800 demonstrates that findings on women’s violence vary according to the sources used. In the eighteenth century, only 6 percent of violent acts prosecuted by criminal courts in Rotterdam and Amsterdam involved women. The proportion of violent women brought before courts of correction (a lower court) was significantly higher: almost a quarter of all violence involved women, including 42 percent of cases involving fighting (Van der Heijden 2013). As most historians focus on the criminal courts, women’s participation in crime remains largely invisible and overlooked (Hurl-Eamon 2005; Auspert, De Koster, and Massin 2020).

Finally, women's crime is less well-examined than men's because historians and historical criminologists tend to focus on serious crime, particularly violence (Smith 2014). Trends in homicide and manslaughter have been central to the debate on long-term patterns in crime; such studies exclude women because these types of crime are predominantly committed by men. Women committed violent crimes, but less serious ones were dealt with in lower courts or in less formal forums of justice. Research on women's violence in England, Scotland, and Holland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has shown that the fighting styles of men and women were remarkably similar (Walker 2003; Hurl-Eamon 2005; Warner, Graham and Adlaf 2005; Kilday 2007; Van der Heijden 2016*a*).

The focus on the most serious crimes also overlooks the reality that the large majority of offenses committed by both men and women are minor property offenses. Schmidt (2020, p. 61), in a comparative study on crime and gender in Dutch cities between 1600 and 1800, concludes that the gender gap was much smaller within "the category that formed the largest share of offenses prosecuted by criminal courts in early modern towns, namely property crimes." Women's involvement in property crime has often been associated with their household roles, but such generalizations have proven to be too simplistic (Dean 2008; Van der Heijden 2016*a*). The type of property offenses committed by men and women often reflected instead the gendering of urban spaces and occupational segregation by sex (Schmidt 2020).

Female crime and gender patterns in recent decades have received more attention, and research has provided more data on women's crime than in the past (Muurling, Pluskota and Van der Heijden 2020). However, as Wilczak (2022, p. 8) observes in *Gender, Crime, and Justice*, "much of the research on crime and justice does not include women."

II. Theories on Gender and Crime

A central point in the scholarly debate on female offending has been whether scholars need separate theories to explain male and female crime. Men and women are often treated as a homogenous group, but their crime experiences and treatment by the justice system might be very different (Smith 2014). Kathy Daly and Meda Chesney-Lind (1988) introduced the term "generalizability" to discuss the question whether theories explaining men's and boy's crime apply to women and girls. General theories

are often based on men's criminal behavior, their social and economic positions in society, and their experiences. They seldom include experiences of women or gender as a factor in crime patterns. General theories might be helpful in relating men's crimes to their socioeconomic circumstances, but they are not necessarily helpful for understanding women's crime. Kruttschnitt (2016) has argued that we should move beyond too simplistic ideas about gender and crime, and look at situations, backgrounds, and relational processes that are gender-invariant as well as at particular behaviors that may be the result of specific male and female circumstances.

Other scholars oppose theories that too easily assume fundamental differences in the choices of men and women. In her study on economic crimes, Pamela Davies (1999) argues that the "rational choice perspective," which explains men's criminal behavior by looking at their reasons and considerations, might equally well be applied to women. The rational choice perspective holds that men commit economic crimes for economic gain because of hardship and unemployment. She argues that the possibility of rationality being a female criminal's attribute has never been systematically explored. Even though most female crime is property crime, women's involvement in economic crimes is seldom explained by hardship, unemployment, and their opportunities to earn a living. Davies's suggestions are particularly helpful for explaining female criminality in European cities before 1800. Early modern towns were characterized by a surplus of women and a high percentage of households headed by women who had to provide for themselves and their families (Fauve-Chamoux and Sogner 1994; Van der Heijden 2016a; Schmidt 2020).

Darrell Steffensmeier and Emilie Allan (1996) argued for a gendered approach that is compatible with traditional gender-neutral theories that consider social forces as the main causes of male and female crime. They believe that the social backgrounds of female offenders tend to be quite similar to those of male offenders; both are typically of low socioeconomic status, poorly educated, under- or unemployed, and disproportionately from minority groups. What is missing from existing theories is information about the specific ways in which differences in the lives of men and women contribute to gender differences in the types, frequency, and contexts of criminal behavior. Gendered social and cultural patterns in childrearing may also result in different behavioral and work roles. This gendered approach should include examination of gendered differences in the type and frequency of crime and differences in offending contexts.

Although much less contextual information is available for times before 1800, crime historians also urge looking at contexts as explanatory factors. Historian Trevor Dean (2008) argues that historians should look at the variety of similar motives that exist for both sexes instead of emphasizing differences based on specific roles of women and men. Garthine Walker (2003) and others argue that assumptions about women's crime are often based on cultural stereotypes and lack of information on women's activities in the past. As women were overrepresented in witchcraft, infanticide, and moral offenses, historians have labeled such crimes as typically "female" and all other crimes as typically "male" or "masculine." However, such images of women's crime have little to do with the real practices of female offenders. In their research on crime and gender between 1600 and 1900, Muurling, Pluskota and Van der Heijden (2020) suggest that a more contextualized approach will help explain why women committed crimes and which crimes they committed in specific contexts. In section IV I show how such contextual factors as urbanization, moral and legal norms, family systems, labor force participation, and welfare regimes can explain differences in men's and women's participation in crime before 1800.

Gendered crime patterns are the result not only of differences between men's and women's crimes, but also the product of different attitudes toward men and women. To what extent were women and men treated differently by the judicial system? Central points in the historical debate on female crime are the notions of "double deviancy" and "leniency." Heidensohn (1968) introduced "double deviance" theory, which posits that women are treated more harshly than men because they are seen to be guilty both of breaking the law and of deviating from gender norms. Lucia Zedner (1991*b*) argued that female criminals in Victorian England were indeed victims of "double deviancy": the courts punished them for breaking the law and for breeching norms about female behavior (Godfrey 2014). Consequently, violent women were punished more harshly than violent men. Feminine respectability and social position determined the extent to which women's testimony was taken seriously and played an important role in courts' decisions. British philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007) coined the term "testimonial injustice" to explain unfairness in the judicial system related to trusting someone's word. Women's testimony, compared with men's, may more often have been ignored, not believed, or deemed less credible because of their sex, sexuality, or gender presentation. Such biases are particularly relevant to women's

crime in the past, because of their often legally and socially subordinate position.

At the same time, sociocultural prejudices could work to the advantage of women. Historians, in studies on prosecution of violence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have pointed to the effect of “leniency” toward women in the criminal process. Martin Wiener (1998, 2004) argued that English courts in the nineteenth century increasingly focused on men and less on women. This change entailed a different attitude toward men’s violence against women, resulting in the “criminalization of men.” Homicidal women who could prove their good character received more support from the authorities and were treated with more leniency, while homicidal men faced harsher treatment. Peter King’s research on London between 1720 and 1820 showed that women were indeed less likely to be convicted and more likely to be given more lenient sentences than men (King 2006). Barry Godfrey’s (2014) study of the lower courts in the Anglophone world (United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and England) between 1860 and 1920 also found that men were slightly more likely to be convicted. Although some scholars have been critical of claims about a decline in the acceptability of male violence, most studies on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and France seem to confirm the notion of “leniency” toward women (Davies 1999; Muchembled 2012; Godfrey 2014).

Outside England and France there is much less evidence of the “criminalization of men.” McMahon, Eibach, and Roth (2013) warn against neat narratives of decline, because the evidence on male violence shows fluctuations and variations across time and space. For example, Van der Heijden and Pluskota’s (2015) study on the prosecution of violent crime in nineteenth-century Holland found no evidence of gender bias. As in England, a growing interest in violence and increasing prosecution rates for assaults were noticeable, but women were not less likely to be convicted. Men who were convicted received harsher penalties than women, but these differences were probably linked to the severity of wounds inflicted and the socioeconomic positions of those convicted. They conclude that differences in conviction and sentence for male and female offenders in English and Dutch courts may not necessarily represent different attitudes toward men’s and women’s violence. The different outcome could also be related to the different judicial systems; English magistrates presumably had more discretion than the Dutch judges, who were to a greater extent bound by a detailed penal code.

III. The “Vanishing Female” Debate

The large differences between crime figures today and in early modern times raise the most debated issue in the history of crime and gender.¹ Contemporary criminological theories on the causes of crime point mainly to a combination of risk factors, but we lack data of this kind before 1800. It is therefore difficult to compare figures on female criminality in recent decades with information for the early modern period. Even so, the high percentages of female crime in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have produced an academic debate about trends in male and female recorded crime.

In the 1990s, the American criminologist Malcolm Feeley (1994) started the debate with the claim that until about 1750, women throughout Western Europe committed many more crimes than do present-day women. Based on data from England, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia Feeley argued that high crime figures are not linked to gender bias and that women were no more likely to be suspected or convicted of certain crimes than they are now. According to Feeley, the statistics reflect the reality: women committed more crimes in the early modern period than today. He claimed that women’s high crime rates declined because of industrialization, beginning around 1750. He called this change the “vanishing female,” an allusion to the relative disappearance of women from the criminal process due to industrialization.

Feeley and his coauthors Deborah Little and Hadar Aviram (Feeley and Little 1991; Feeley and Aviram 2010) argued that the process of industrialization created a fundamental distinction between the public and private spheres. In the breadwinner model associated with this historical trend, men had to focus on providing for the household financially, while women worked in the home and concentrated on housekeeping and raising children. This led to confinement of women in private places and expulsion of women from the labor market, in which men remained active. This development had two major consequences for the prosecution of female crime. First, the breadwinner ideology changed the attitudes of judges and public prosecutors toward criminal women. They began to take women’s crimes less seriously, and as a result women were less likely to be prosecuted and convicted. At the same time, the ideology of public and private roles led to a real decrease in crime committed by women. As women were removed from the public sphere and the labor

¹ This paragraph draws on Van der Heijden (2016a, 2016b).

market, they spent more of their lives in the home and had fewer opportunities and temptations to commit crimes.

The “vanishing female” thesis led to a heated debate. Though recognizing that demography, jurisdiction, and war may have played roles in the changing proportions of women in crime rates, Feeley and his co-authors disputed the relevance of such factors. Demographic developments and changes in the judicial system would not be sufficient to explain long-term trends in female crime. Instead, they argue, “the vanishing female in the criminal process may reflect a shift to more private forms of social control brought on by shifting social attitudes and the rise of industrialism” (Feeley and Little 1991, p. 719). While historians agree that a separation of private and public spheres may have reinforced gendered crime patterns, most scholars have raised substantial doubts about the “vanishing female” thesis (Emsley 1996; Shoemaker 1998; Arnot and Osborne 2003; King 2006; Van der Heijden 2013). Feeley and his co-authors based their findings on the proceedings of the Old Bailey in London between 1687 and 1912 and on secondary literature on female crime, particularly in the Netherlands.

The most important contribution to the debate was made by British historian Peter King, an expert on Old Bailey proceedings who devoted a chapter of his book *Crime and Law in England* (2006) to thoroughly refuting Feeley’s claims. King’s most decisive criticism is of Feeley’s research methods. King argues that Old Bailey sources yield incomplete information about England between 1687 to 1912. Because of changes in the English criminal-justice system, only felonies were tried in the Old Bailey from about 1750 onward. Many lesser crimes committed by women were therefore no longer handled in the Old Bailey. King suggests that this explains the apparent decline in female crime after 1750. In addition, he argues that the English evidence points to long-term stability in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rather than a long-term decline. Looking at other courts that dealt with lesser offenses led him to conclude that between 1750 and 1850 female criminal behavior fluctuated under the influence of various factors, such as war, demographics, and jurisdiction, but that there was no striking downward trend. King observed wide variation in the proportions of female offenders and a large difference between cities and the countryside; female crime rates were much higher in the London region than in rural areas (also see Beattie 1975). King concluded, “On closer inspection therefore, the vanishing female offender vanishes” (2006, p. 220).

Dutch historians Van der Heijden and Koningsberger (2013) raised methodological and conceptual concerns about Feeley and his coauthors' handling of Dutch sources. They argue that Feeley's assertions appear to be based on inaccurate information and incorrect assumptions. First, he disregards some major determinants of the fluctuation in male and female crime: social and economic conditions, changes in the organization of the justice system, and differences between regions and between urban and rural areas. For instance, Feeley and his coauthors overlooked significant jurisdictional changes in Holland due to the introduction of the Napoleonic code in 1811. A second major objection relates to the period over which Feeley collected his data. He argues that women became invisible late in the eighteenth century, but he draws primarily on information about the seventeenth century and provides almost no data after 1811. The lack of consistent evidence on the period around 1800 is particularly a problem because he relates the drop in female crime to a process of industrialization occurring between 1750 and 1850. The process of industrialization started in Holland as late as 1850; the reliable Dutch data used by Feeley cover the period before 1811.

Evidence from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Holland confirms the pattern of female crime described by King (2006) for London in the same period. As in England, there was long-term stability in the female proportion of crime between 1750 and 1838. During this period women's involvement in crime continued to be high in urban areas. Data from regional courts show lower figures of the proportion of women's crime between 1839 and 1886, but this trend reflects important changes in the Dutch judicial system. In the early modern period, almost all crimes were handled by local courts, but those courts were replaced by regional courts after 1811. After about 1838, the national data include all types of crime committed by men and women in rural as well as in urban regions, and differences between urban and rural areas became visible (Van der Heijden 2016*a*). The figures on England and the Netherlands suggest continuity in female crime rates until at least the first half of the nineteenth century.

The final weak point in Feeley's work is the hypothesized link between industrialization and a decline in female crime. Feeley assumes that women were expelled from the labor market between approximately 1750 and 1850 because of industrialization. However, European historians have shown that there was no such connection. Schwerhoff (2000) pointed out that women's labor market participation rate in Germany increased

in the nineteenth century, without a rise in figures for female crime. Demographic historians have argued that Dutch industrialization had little influence on women's participation in the labor market. The rise of the industrial economy did not necessarily create employment for women, but neither did it lead to their exclusion from the workplace (Van Poppel, Van Dalen, and Walhout 2006; Braspeninx and Kalkhoven 2009). In addition, the alleged disappearance of women from the public sphere did not occur because women's activities did not reflect prevailing ideologies of domestic and public roles (Schmidt and Nederveen Meerkerk 2012).

Feeley's pioneering work undoubtedly stimulated the debate on crime and gender. The assumed relationship between the public roles of women and their share in crime is widely accepted. However, data for crime patterns between 1800 and 1900 seem to suggest continuity in female crime rates until the end of the nineteenth century rather than a sharp decline. The problem is that figures on long-term European crime rates are often inconsistent and inadequate to justify firm conclusions. There is more information about the determining factors of women's large involvement in crime between 1500 and 1800. Section IV explores these determinants and considers new explanations for low female crime rates after the middle of the nineteenth century: rising living standards and changing welfare arrangements.

IV. Public Roles and Gender Patterns in Crime

Historians generally link gender differences in recorded crime to ideologies and practices of male and female public roles. Male and female roles can be related to a structural difference between domestic and public spheres of activity (Shoemaker 1988; Van der Heijden 2020). Most scholars distinguish between two explanations for the gendered pattern of prosecuted crime. First, women commit fewer and different crimes than men because of the different nature of their lives: women are more confined to the domestic sphere while men have more freedom to engage in public and criminal activity. Second, according to their prescribed gender role women are expected to be less criminal and more law-abiding, resulting in biased criminal-justice-system procedures (Shoemaker 1988; Feeley and Little 1991; Zedner 1991*a*, 2006; King 2006; Spierenburg 2008).

Although many historians use the concept of public roles to explain gender differences in crime, most agree that the dichotomy of private and

public spheres is troublesome. In practice the distinction between the two spheres was not strict, and both men and women moved easily from so-called private to public spheres. Strict moral norms about the public roles of men and women were not always reflected in everyday lives. Predominant household ideologies may have emphasized the domestic and passive character of women, but in practice women transcended the realm of the household and engaged in many activities. Consequently, gendered patterns in crime rates depend as much on moral and legal norms as on men's and women's roles in everyday life (Shoemaker 1988; Wunder 1998; Rublack 1999; Walker 2003; Van der Heijden 2016*b*). A second fundamental problem was raised by Eibach in his work on early modern households. He introduced the concept of "the open house" to argue convincingly that the separation between public and private spheres was irrelevant for the early modern period because of the blurry notions of private and public (Eibach 2011; Eibach et al. 2015). Urban authorities did not distinguish between public and private activities, and they attempted to control behavior occurring in both the streets and people's homes. As Muurling and Pluskota (2017) have shown in their study on the gendered geography of violence between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the private-public dichotomy is particularly problematic for the study of crime because crimes were committed in a wide variety of places, and not all of them are easily labeled as private or public. The idea of gendered public and private spheres is therefore a helpful notion but is too limited for explaining men's and women's criminal behavior and their relative proportions in crime.

Recently, Van der Heijden suggested that it might be useful to include the concept of "agency" in studying the variety of roles men and women play in relation to crime. The concept of agency is not unproblematic, because it can easily lead to the disregard of structural and institutional forces that influence women's behavior. However, Montenach and Simonton have provided a helpful definition of agency: "a process and mosaic of changing opportunities" (2013, p. 5). This description considers both the obstacles women were confronted with and the opportunities available to them. This definition of crime enables historians to examine why women committed crimes and under what circumstances, instead of wondering why they did not commit crimes, or why they did so less frequently than men. The variation in gender differences can therefore be explained by factors that are conducive to the ability of men and women to lead public lives and to commit crimes. The activities of men and

women and their incentives to commit crime are strongly determined by circumstances that have varied over time and space.

In the following subsections, I discuss five such factors: moral and legal norms; urbanization; family systems; labor market participation; and rising living standards and welfare arrangements. Table 1 gives an overview of the factors that determined public roles and the impact on crime rates of men and women.

A. Moral and Legal Norms

Gender differences in recorded crime are linked to moral and legal norms that vary over time and space. Ideologies and legal norms about the behavior of men and women influenced their roles and activities in everyday life, their opportunities to commit crime, and responses to women's criminal acts. Although such distinctions are heavily debated, some historians point to fundamental regional differences in attitudes toward men and women in southern and northern Europe. Women in the south may have had less visible lives because of the importance of ideas about honor and female virtue (Viazzo 2003).

Gender norms also led to biased prosecution policies, particularly relating to sexual behavior and religious matters. In early modern Europe, women were more likely to be accused of sexual and religious offenses than men, and such double standards in part explain why female crime rates were sometimes exceptionally high (Schwerhoff 1995; Cohn 1996; Dean 2008; Van der Heijden 2016*a*). Large-scale witch hunts led to considerably higher female crime rates in the German areas (Levack 1987; Schwerhoff 1991, 1995; Behringer 1995; Durrant 2007). Double standards of prosecutors toward sexual behavior led in most early modern European towns to higher female crime rates pertaining to fornication, adultery, and prostitution. Women were not only more likely to be arrested for sexual offenses; they also generally received harsher treatment for their sexual crimes than did men (Rublack 1999; Van der Heijden 2016*a*; Beam 2020).

Prosecutors also applied double standards regarding male behavior. Wiener (1998) has shown that violent male behavior in England was increasingly prosecuted during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He called this shift "the criminalization of men" (also see Spierenburg 2008, 2012). The focus on violence by men was related to new ideas about family values, domestic violence, and protection of children. Some historians assumed that the British case represented a general western

TABLE 1
 Factors, Public Roles, and Effect on Crime Rates of Men and Women, 1600–1900

Factors	Public roles	Effect on crime rates
Moral and legal norms of public roles	Men lead more public lives than women	Biased criminal procedures: 1. Men commit more crimes than women. 2. Men more often prosecuted than women. 3. Men and women prosecuted for specific types of crime.
Level of urbanization	High: larger public roles Low: fewer public roles	Higher female share of crime Lower female share of crime
Gender equality in family system	High: larger public roles Low: fewer public roles	Higher female share of crime Lower female share of crime
Gender equality in labor participation	High: larger public roles Low: fewer public roles	Higher female share of crime Lower female share of crime
Living standards/welfare arrangements	Low: larger public roles High: lower public roles	Higher female share of crime Lower female share of crime

European pattern, but research on Holland suggests that the increasing focus on prosecution of male violence may have been a particular British phenomenon (Van der Heijden and Pluskota 2015).

The judicial system played an important role in the prosecution of male and female crime. First, different types of courts handled different types of crime and employed different kinds of procedures. As mentioned above, women's crimes were often likely to be handled by lower courts or less informal forms of dispute regulation than by higher courts (Williams 2000; Van der Heijden 2013; Gray 2016). Second, judicial transformations led to changes in the prosecution of types of crime and in the treatment of men and women by the courts. King (2006) has shown that jurisdictional changes in the London area account for much of the reduction in the appearance of women at the Old Bailey after 1850. In France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, bureaucratization and centralization also caused fundamental changes in judicial systems (Leonards 1995; Härter, Stolleis, and Tamm 2008; Van der Heijden 2010). The rise of a professional judicial system influenced the different outcomes of recorded male and female crime in different areas and different periods. Such changes explain different prosecution policies toward men and women in various countries. Lucassen (2008) found that in the nineteenth century the concepts of policing and exclusion was broader in Germany, which made certain groups more vulnerable to criminalization than in other regions in Europe (also see Althammer, Gestrich, and Gründler 2014).

Prosecution patterns result not only from the influence of legal norms expressed by the authorities, but also from the ways populations make use of justice processes. German historian Martin Dinges coined the term "uses of justice" to argue that people in the early modern period used judicial institutions as instruments of social control, which can help explain different outcomes of recorded male and female crime in different areas and different periods. Comparisons of various forms of justice in early modern Europe demonstrate that women's crimes were more apparent in the records of lower and more accessible criminal courts than in higher courts.

The prosecution of men's and women's crimes by the early modern courts are thus as much the outcome of bottom-up moral norms as of top-down legal norms.

B. Urbanization

Urbanization is a second important factor that explains levels of male and female crime in relation to public activities in the early modern period.

English historian John Beattie (1975, 1986) was the first to link high levels of female crime to urbanization. He found that women's contribution to crime in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was generally much higher in cities than in rural communities or small towns. The most urbanized areas, such as Surrey and Kent, had the highest percentages of female criminals; courts in rural areas prosecuted much smaller numbers of women. He argued that the lack of economic and social support from the traditional community caused women in towns to lead more independent, public, and risky lives. Studies on female crime in France and Holland in the early modern period confirmed Beattie's findings. A large proportion of young and lower-class women migrated from rural areas to cities on their own, and for them criminal activities such as theft and prostitution became a logical survival strategy (Farge 1974; Castan 1980; Lambert 2012; Van der Heijden 2016*a*). Olwen Hufton in her work on eighteenth-century France aptly termed this survival strategy "an economy of makeshifts" (1974, pp. 109–10).

Female crime rates were generally much higher in towns and cities than in the countryside, but there were also significant differences between regions within Europe. The level of urbanization helps explain differences between male and female crime rates between 1600 and 1800 in a number of countries (table 2). Low levels of urbanization (and smaller towns) may have led to less agency and fewer public activities by women and consequently lower female crime rates. There were significant differences in urbanization levels. Generally, the degree of urbanization between 1600

TABLE 2
Percentage of Women among Persons Prosecuted in European Cities,
ca. 1600–1800

City	Period	% of women in prosecutions
Amsterdam	1620–1810	42
Rotterdam	1700–1810	35
Leiden	1600–1810	32
London	1687–1750	40
Paris	1700–1800	25
Frankfurt	1600–1806	22
Cologne	1568–1612	16
Cologne	1698–1712	45
Bologna	1610–1789	15

SOURCES.—Schwerhoff (1991); Eibach (2003); King (2006); Van der Heijden (2016*a*); Kamp (2020); Schmidt (2020); Muurling (2021).

and 1800 was much higher in England and the Low Countries than in German areas and in southern Europe. Around 1700, 30 to 40 percent of the Dutch population lived in towns, in England 20 percent, in Italy 18 percent, and in Germany 5.5 percent. The level of urbanization in Holland (the western part of the Netherlands) in the eighteenth century was 70 percent (De Vries and Van der Woude 1997; Clark 2009).

The high urbanization levels in England and the Low Countries correspond with high levels of female crime in those areas. The highest shares of women in crime were in London and Amsterdam in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, sometimes around 50 percent in both cities. Recent research on female crime rates in early modern Holland also finds remarkably high proportions of women in crime in other Dutch cities. In Rotterdam, women accounted for 35 percent of defendants in the eighteenth century and in Leiden between 1678 and 1794 the female share of prosecuted crimes was 41 percent. These figures were in part related to double standards in relation to sexual behavior: 55 percent of prosecutions for moral offenses in Leiden between 1601 and 1810 involved women. Women's share of property crime was also high; 37 percent were committed by women (Schmidt 2020). Data on eighteenth-century Rotterdam show that women were also heavily involved in petty violence, accounting for 30 to 40 percent of offenses recorded in the so-called "fight books" of Rotterdam (Van der Heijden 2016*a*).

Generally, lower levels of female crime were found in areas with lower urbanization. Examinations of German regions in the seventeenth show that approximately 22 percent of those arrested in Frankfurt were women and in Cologne approximately 16 percent (Schwerhoff 1991, 1995; Eibach 2003; Kamp 2020). That 80 percent of the witnesses in Cologne's criminal cases were men, and that women were seldom accused of offenses against the authorities, points to less visible roles of women in the public space. In addition, most female crime in German cities was committed around the house, while most men committed their crimes around the marketplace. In the cities of Holland, women committed their crimes more often in public places, in the streets, in inns, or in other public areas (Van der Heijden 2016*a*). Crime rates found in Italian cities were consistently lower than in northern European towns. Studies on Florence, Rome, and Bologna reveal that women's share of recorded crime never rose above 15 percent between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries (Muurling 2021).

Assumptions about links between levels of urbanization and levels of female involvement in recorded crime should be taken with caution because

they can lead to overly strong generalizations. Level of urbanization, city population sizes, and socioeconomic circumstances in various regions in Europe changed considerably over time. Schwerhoff (1995) found that the proportion of women among offenders in Cologne changed considerably in the eighteenth century. Women accounted for only about 16 percent of prosecutions in the late sixteenth century but up to 45 percent from the beginning of the eighteenth. He argues that economic decline resulted in growing numbers of crimes of “poverty” such as theft and prostitution committed by women. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Italian cities underwent important changes in urbanization and economic growth. Cohn’s (1998) study on Florence found that female involvement in crime declined from 21 to 14 percent after 1500. He suggests that this was related to women’s less active public lives and a decline in women’s access to the courts. More research on Italian cities between 1600 and 1800 is needed, however, to reach firm conclusions about the effects of urban and economic decline in Italy on female crime rates after 1500.

High female crime rates in London, Amsterdam, and Rotterdam were related not only to economic growth and the sizes of those cities, but also to their characteristics. Maritime cities such as London, Amsterdam, and Rotterdam were characterized by large influxes of immigrants, a surplus of women, high percentages of households headed by women, and relatively large populations of women on their own. The large majority of these women belonged to lower social strata and had to cope without the support of a husband or other family members. They led more independent and public lives, which made them more vulnerable, resulting in higher risks of becoming involved with the law than their counterparts in less dynamic towns (Van der Heijden 2016a; Schmidt 2020).

C. Family Systems

Women’s agency and their scope to undertake public activities is related to their positions within family systems. Economic and demographic historians have argued that the relatively independent position of women in pre-industrial northwestern Europe allowed women greater freedom to make their own choices and to play public roles (Van Zanden and De Moor 2010; Carmichael, De Pleijt, Van Zanden, and De Moor 2016). The link between family systems and women’s agency may be a good indicator for differences in female crime rates in various regions in Europe.

According to family system theory, the absolute nuclear family—found in England and Holland—was characterized by relative freedom of choice of a marriage partner and relatively equal inheritance laws (Kok 2010). Weak family ties were reflected in a relatively early age of leaving home, a relatively long period of independence before marriage, late marriage, and high percentages of singles and one-parent families (Hufton 1984; Moch 2003); women may have gained more freedom and independence. The vulnerable and poor young women who turned to crime in the early modern cities of Holland and England often did not receive support from household members. Many were migrants and far from home. In Holland domestic servants were not necessarily seen as members of the household (Van der Heijden and Schmidt 2015).

The authoritarian family in the German areas by contrast was characterized by frequently arranged marriages. Family ties were strong, and marriages were frequently arranged by the parents. Children lived at home until they were married and were supported by their parents for a long period. Kamp's (2020) work on early modern Frankfurt demonstrates that women in such a family system may have had less agency to act independently but also received more support and protection. She suggests that strong informal control by household authorities may explain low female crime rates in German towns. In early modern Frankfurt, housefathers protected and disciplined all members of the household, including migrant domestic servants. The female offenders who were prosecuted by the urban court were those who had failed to secure a position within a household and to receive protection from the "Hausvater." The authoritarian family system thus affected how female crime was prosecuted in Frankfurt in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The strength of patriarchal values in Italy compared to those in northwestern Europe has been subject of debate, but scholars generally agree that Italian women's legal position was relatively weak (Kuehn 1996, 2001; Viazzo 2003; Muurling 2021). Strong patriarchal values and statutory restrictions disadvantaged women's general access to property (inheritance and dowry) and limited their legal agency (Cohn 1998; Kuehn 2017). A comparative study of women's violence in the Dutch city of Rotterdam and the Italian city of Bologna reveals that women's free movement was more limited in Bologna than in Rotterdam, resulting in higher levels of female violence in Rotterdam (Van der Heijden and Muurling 2018).

Differences in family systems probably had effects on the freedom of men and women to lead public lives and on their incentives to commit

crimes. However, Muurling (2021) warns against too simplistic dichotomies between southern and northern regions, emphasizing that despite the legal restrictions Bolognese women had a greater scope of action than is commonly recognized.

The relatively independent positions of women and their larger public roles can explain the high female crime rates in the towns in England and Holland. Women, being involved in public activities, had more opportunities to make their own decisions, to move around freely, and to work outside the home. This freedom made them more vulnerable and caused greater risks of becoming involved in crime. Because of their more public lifestyles, the insecurity of their employment, and the lack of family support, independent women, especially if they were lower-class, were more likely to enter into disputes and to commit crimes in times of hardship.

D. Labor Market Participation

A fourth factor that explains women's agency and freedom to lead public lives is the labor market. Levels of male and female labor force participation raise central issues in the debate about the "vanishing female" (Feeley 1994).

Recent work on women's labor in rural and urban areas in early modern Europe have provided substantial data on their labor force participation rates. The female labor force in the early modern English economy contributed 44 percent of work in the economy, rather than the 30 percent previously estimated (Whittle 2024). Women's high share of work is particularly relevant to crime historians, because the data are based on evidence from courts in different English regions. Data on female labor in the Netherlands also suggest that women's labor force participation was high in the early modern period, because of high demand and less restrictive craft guild rules concerning women (Schmidt and Van Nederveen Meerkerk 2012).

Although it is likely that the high level of women's participation in English and Dutch labor markets before the middle of the nineteenth century was related to their independent positions and their greater legal autonomy, it is much less clear whether there is a link between women's declining labor force participation and the decline in female crime rates at the end of the nineteenth century. Economic historians agree that the breadwinner ideology intensified among the middle classes around 1800, though there are doubts about the practical effects of changed household ideologies.

The breadwinner ideology primarily affected the lives of middle-class married women but affected single women, widows, and working-class married women much less (Ruitenbeek 2009; Wettmann-Jungblut 2009). Female labor force participation levels may have been an important indicator of women's leeway to lead public and criminal lives in the premodern period, but they are not the primary explanation for women's declining presence (in numbers and relative to male prosecutions) in European courts beginning in the late nineteenth century.

E. Rising Living Standards and Welfare Arrangements

Feeley's timing for the decline in female crime rates may have been wrong, but he was correct about the significant drop in women's share in crime. Although systematic research on women's crime in the transitional period between 1850 and 1920 needs to be done, criminal-justice statistics indicate that the proportion of women in crime remained low throughout the twentieth century. The question remains why women's crime involvement dropped significantly. Indirect effects of industrialization, improvement in living standards, and emergence of the welfare state may be more indirectly related to low female crime rates in Europe after 1900.

Economic historian Gregory Clark (2007) argues that the Industrial Revolution improved women's position and that, though women faced more barriers to promotion than men, women's wages relative to men's improved compared to the pre-industrial period. In addition, after 1900 overall equality between the sexes increased. Data on life expectancy in Europe between 1770 and 1950 show that improvements in the quality of life led to a huge increase in life expectancy after 1900 (Zijdeman and Ribeira da Silva 2015). This resulted from a rise in the quantity and quality of goods consumed and advances in medicine, public health, and living standards (Dattani et al. 2023). Substantial improvement in living standards after 1900 may have made it less necessary for women to become involved in crime.

The emergence of the welfare state after the second half of the nineteenth century also contributed to a general improvement of living standards. Before 1800, poor relief and health care were organized by myriad private initiatives and ecclesiastical and secular institutions; this system was insufficient and exclusive (Van der Heijden 2012). Around 1900, both cities and central governments began to take on direct responsibility for the well-being of citizens, resulting in increases in social-care arrangements

everywhere in western Europe. Welfare programs sought to prevent families from falling into abject poverty; governments' attention was increasingly focused on those who needed help the most: women and children. German historians Althammer, Gestrich, and Gründler (2014) have argued that these developments led to increasing control over the lives of poor people who did not adhere to the rules of the welfare state. Consequently, new groups were targeted by the police and judicial institutions. However, scholars generally agree that welfare policies on the whole improved the lives of poor families (Roser 2016). Rising living standards and new welfare arrangements were particularly important to women, whose crimes—more than men's—seem to have been related to poverty and low living standards. The large majority of women coming before the courts before 1800 came from the lowest social strata and had to survive without protection and support from husbands or other family members. German studies have shown that increases in convictions of women in the second half of the eighteenth century were related to subsistence crises that caused a lack of resources for many families and motivated women to commit thefts. The evidence points to a clear link between the types of offenses women committed and their poor living circumstances. Most women convicted in Germany in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were unmarried, had no children, were not integrated into urban social structures, and came from poor lower-class families. Theft was a survival strategy to maintain themselves when common resources were running out. Increasing poverty and mounting problems of vagrancy resulted not only in increases in crimes committed, but also in harsher prosecution policies that focused on the lower strata and outsiders (Eibach 2003; Wettmann-Jungblut 2009).

Improving living standards may explain the decline in female crime rates in Europe after 1900. Improvement in living standards and extension of welfare arrangements gave women more survival opportunities. Althammer and colleagues (2014) and Althammer (2018) in their work on vagrancy offenses in Europe suggest that women's proportion in court cases involving begging and vagrancy declined in the nineteenth century because welfare provisions made them less dependent on almsgiving. Dutch historians Van Drenth and De Haan introduced the helpful term "caring power" to describe women's increasing activities to care for poor, disabled, and convicted women. These activities included support programs for imprisoned women, which may have reduced female recidivism (Van Drenth and De Haan 1999).

Many poor and deprived women who traditionally came before the courts ended up in new institutions such as workhouses, reform houses, and other institutions for the poor (Smith 2014). Weevers and Bijleveld (2010*a*, 2010*b*) found that a majority of women committed to Dutch workhouses for begging and vagrancy in the late nineteenth-century Netherlands were very poor, old, and ill or disabled. Similar conclusions are offered by Williams and Godfrey (2020) in their work on the female prison population in 1881. They concluded that certain groups of the deviant female population were probably dealt with outside the traditional judicial system, in state, private, and charitable institutions that included homes for the aged and the destitute and for “fallen” women. More research on the links between the rise of the welfare state and the decline in female crime rates is needed to draw definitive conclusions. Examination of the profiles of women in prisons, workhouses, and other institutions may help explain why women’s involvement in the penal system declined substantially after the end of the nineteenth century.

V. Patterns in Gender and Crime since 1900

I look in this section at general patterns in gender and crime in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and explore explanations for changes in women’s crime involvement. Data on female criminality in Europe between 1860 and 1960 consistently show women’s low crime rates, absolutely and relative to men’s. In England and Wales, women represented 20 to 26 percent of summary and indictable offenses (D’Cruze and Jackson 2009). Such low figures are typical of women’s crime in Europe until the 1970s, although the size of the gender gap varied considerably. For example, Estrada, Nilsson, and Pettersson (2019), in research on female conviction rates in Sweden between 1905 and 1950, documented a continuously large gender gap in male and female convictions, but the level of the gap varied over time. The types of crime committed by women in the twentieth century closely resembled those committed by women before 1900: the vast majority of women coming before the courts were prosecuted for property offenses, particularly theft (D’Cruze and Jackson 2009).

Although crime by men continues to dominate crime statistics, there are indications that the gender gap decreased beginning in the 1970s and 1980s in Europe and the United States. Steffensmeier (1980) was among

the first to address rising concern about a “modern female crime wave” in the 1970s. American data from the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports and the National Crime Victimization Survey demonstrate an increase in women’s involvement in offenses in certain types of property offenses, such as fraud and larceny, between 1965 and 2000. The number of arrests of women for misdemeanor and assault cases also increased, although this did not include an increase in the female share in assault arrests (Steffensmeier and Schwarz 2004). The number of women in prison increased subsequently. Kruttschnitt and Gartner (2003), examining trends in women’s imprisonment in the United States and England and Wales, found that it increased in the final decades of the twentieth century. For example, until the 1980s, the female imprisonment rate in the United States never exceeded ten per 100,000 female population, but between 1980 and 2000 it increased more than fivefold.

Growing concern about increases in female violent behavior has been central to the scholarly debate on women’s crime in recent decades. Chesney-Lind and Lisa Pasko (2013) address complexities in interpreting data in the “bad girl” discourse. Data on girls’ arrests in the United States seem to support the view that they are increasingly involved in violent crime. Arrests in the category “other assaults” increased by nearly 200 percent after the mid-1980s. Since 2000, robbery arrests rose by 30.2 percent for girls; by 2009, more than one of three juveniles arrested for “other assaults” was female. However, they note that the rises are considerably less dramatic on closer inspection. They argue that the changes reflect changes in youth behavior generally and in American gang problems rather than fundamental changes in the behavior only of girls. Rosemary Gartner therefore concludes: “Popular concerns about a rise in violence by young females are very likely misplaced” (Gartner 2012, p. 355).

European data on women’s violent crime have fostered similar debates on shifts in women’s crime. Data on convictions for theft and violence in Sweden show a sustained decline in gender differences after the 1950s. Estrada, Nilsson, and Pettersson (2019) concluded that variations in the gender gap are attributable to conviction trends among men. The Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics’ data on women’s share in prosecuted crime also reveal significant shifts in recorded crime: crime rates of women and girls increased in the last decades of the twentieth century, with women’s proportion of prosecuted crime increasing from 10 to 20 percent between 1980 and 2004. The increase involved primarily girls between 12

and 17 years old who were arrested for violence, destruction, and property offenses (Eggen 2004).

Two primary explanations have been offered for the apparent rise in violent crime by females. The “behavior change” explanation links changes in the lives of women, such as increased freedom and more opportunities, with greater crime involvement. This posits a real growth in female offending and corresponds to the “public lives” approach discussed above concerning women’s public roles and gender patterns in crime. The “policy change” explanation instead links the rise in recorded female crime to changes in social control practices and in regulation of women’s criminal behavior, arguing that women’s violent crime has become more evident in crime statistics because of changes in definitions of violence and the inclusion of less serious forms of assault.

Jennifer Schwarz (2013) examined three English-speaking countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada) and three northern European countries (Finland, Norway, and Sweden) between 1985 and 2006 to test these two explanations. Her findings support the policy change explanation. She found no evidence in the six countries for rises in homicides committed by women or increases in women’s share in imprisonment. However, there were important differences between countries. In the United States and the United Kingdom, women’s proportions of arrests and convictions did increase (albeit only slightly in the United Kingdom). Schwarz’s cross-national study did not include minor forms of violence, in which official data indicate women are generally more involved (Schwarz 2013).

Chesney-Lind and Pasko (2013) offer a multifactor analysis that links victimization and social circumstances to women’s likelihood of coming into contact with the justice system. They found clear indications that girls’ involvement in crime in the United States is often rooted in their upbringing in marginalized and poor communities. A sizable percentage of female offenders are victims of trauma, sexual and physical abuse, and drug abuse. They therefore urge a more holistic approach that includes the social context and the effects of gender, race, and class on female criminality. Dutch criminologists Anne-Marie Slotboom and her colleagues adopted a similar approach to explain an increase in the involvement of women and girls in violent crime in the Netherlands in recent decades. They found various factors that contributed to girls’ higher risks of becoming involved in crime: mental illness, traumas, early sexual behavior, and low levels of self-control. Young girls with weak relationships with their mothers were

more likely to commit crimes than girls with strong and close mother-daughter relationships (Slotboom et al. 2011; Wong, Slotboom and Bijleveld 2010).

Jennifer Schwarz (2013) has rightly pointed out the complexities in comparing data on female delinquency in different countries and periods. The visibility of women's involvement in crime is strongly related to differences in recording methods, changing definitions of offenses, and law enforcement policies. Women's involvement in crime is also heavily affected by the social contexts in which they live.

VI. Conclusion

Women's relatively low participation in crime since early in the twentieth century has led to the widely held belief that women and girls always and everywhere commit less crime than men and boys. Twentieth-century scholars offered explanations for the gender gap centering on biological differences between men and women or in sociocultural norms regarding men's and women's behavior. As a result, women's criminality has been underrepresented and often misunderstood in studies of crime and criminal justice.

Historical data on crime in Europe between 1600 and 1800 paint a very different picture. Women's share in crime was much higher in the period before 1800. Crimes committed by women were very similar to those committed by men. Large majorities of both men and women coming before courts were prosecuted for property offenses such as theft and larceny. Only a small minority of women were accused of witchcraft, prostitution, and infanticide, and the prosecution of these offenses varied considerably over time and space. The high percentages of women's criminality before 1800 led to a fierce debate on the "vanishing female." That thesis has been refuted; rather evidence from England and the Netherlands suggests continuity in female crime rates until the end of the nineteenth century.

Historical studies have provided more nuanced explanations for the remarkably high levels of female crime before 1800 and for variation in women's share in recorded crime between 1600 and 1900. Gender differences in public roles and in the involvement of men and women in criminal activities were largely determined by five factors. First, moral and legal norms led to biased prosecution policies and to different male and female behavioral patterns. Second, women's higher involvement in crime was

strongly related to differences in levels of urbanization. The lack of economic and social support caused women in cities to lead more independent, public, and risky lives. Third, family structures determined women's freedom and independence and the levels of support and protection they received from relatives and household members. Fourth, women's labor force participation may have contributed to their independence and their ability to lead public and criminal lives. Finally, rising living standards and welfare arrangements may explain low female crime rates after 1900.

Fluctuations in women's shares in crime in Europe and the United States beginning in the 1970s and 1980s onward led to a debate about the "modern female crime wave." Although criminal-justice statistics indicate increases in women's involvement in crime, particularly in relation to minor assault, there is no clear consensus among scholars as to whether rising female numbers and proportions result from real increases in female crime or from changing policies and practices.

Research on long-term patterns in the gender gap in crime is complicated by lack of solid source material and the strong focus on male crime. Criminologists and crime historians have recently begun to explore patterns of female delinquency across time and space, and have offered plausible explanations for women's high crime involvement before 1900. The studies discussed in this essay also show the importance of including different variables in the interpretation of data on gender and crime. It is important to keep in mind that recorded crime is always the outcome both of criminal practices and prosecution policies.

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