

The Implications of the Upsurge of Female Criminality in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This work looks at the implications of the upsurge of female criminality in Nigeria. The work draws its strength from consulting numerous materials. It supports the assertion that more women are now involved in crime. The work infers that they have always been attracted to and actively involved in crime. Poverty, change in the traditional roles of women, the quest for economic occupations and unbiased criminal justice agents are identified as the main reasons for the increase in female criminality. The upsurge of female criminality is not without implications, as such, this study revealed that it will not only destroy the socialization structure of the society, it is a sure way to norm-less state. The need to discourage female criminality in Nigeria calls for encouragement of women in the form of education and training, employment opportunities to reduce poverty and income disparities, and traditional leaders as well as religious leaders involvement in the correctional process.

Keywords: *conviction, crime, criminality, incarceration and recidivism.*

INTRODUCTION

Statistics published by Nigerian Prison Service (2007; 2009), revealed that though crime in the past are ascribed to men, today we cannot say the same, because there is steady increase in the population of women involved in crime. According to Sutherland and Cressey (1978), in the United States, the rate of arrest is five males to one female, the rate of conviction is ten males to one female, the rate of committal to correctional institutions of all types is fifteen males to one female and the rate of imprisonment and detention in reformatories is twenty males to one female. This trend is similar to what we experienced in Nigeria and across the world in time past. In Nigeria, a study conducted at Enugu prison in 1988 shows that out of a total inmate population of 1,700, only 4% were females, while 96% were males (Igbo, 1990 as cited in Igbo, 2007). These statistics present the impression that crime is exclusively men's business and that the number of females who engages in crime is negligible and inconsequential. The same cannot be said today, since the number of women taking lead role in crimes is increasing daily. Jacobson (2009) asserts that the

number of young women offenders has risen by 17 percent in the past four years compared to just 4.5 percent for males. The most significant increase is for traffic offences and in offences against the justice system, which include breaches of bail or bonds and obstructing police. In each of these categories, the number of women convicted jumped to about 35 percent between 2003 and 2007. The universality of gender difference in crime cannot be overestimated. Cutting across all spheres/categories of life, the assertion is that females commit crime less than males, because the people's perception is that committing crime is for man, as such, many efforts to explain crime have been male centred. However, the examination of nature and causes of female offending is not completely absent from criminology. Since the last two decades, Nigeria has been witnessing unprecedented rise as well as sophistication in criminal activities. Hardly any day passes without reports of crime and criminal activities in the news media as they happen in different parts of the country. The new crime wave cuts across all sections of the society, involving men, women and children.

Presumed changes in the pattern of crimes by women are drawing the attention of the popular media as well as sociologists and criminologists to notice female contribution to the increase in recent crime statistics. However, before now, studies of female criminality concentrated on two or three main areas: witchcraft, infanticide and prostitution. In recent times, inquiry into female crime has broadened to include such other crimes as drug trafficking, armed robbery and white-collar crimes in government offices (Chukuezi, 2009). It is as a result of this drastic change, that this study is set to reveal the rate of female crimes in Nigeria, providing logical explanation to such upsurge, presenting the implication of the upsurge of female criminality and suggesting possible ways to curbing them.

Female Criminality

The earliest explanations of female criminality, centres on biological understanding. Emphases then were placed on the role of biological and psychological factors in explaining female involvement in crime. Although, early explanations of crime focused heavily on male criminality and treated female crime as somewhat of an anomaly, some attempts were made to explain female crime. As was the case in criminology, more generally, two competing viewpoints informed the writings on female offending in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's. One viewpoint emphasized the role of biological factors and psychological factors in women and girls' crime, typically postulating that criminal women exhibited masculine biological or psychological orientations (Lombroso and Freud) or what Igbo (2007) refers to as "penis envy". The second view

stressed the role of social or economic forces and assumed that the social and cultural influences affecting male criminality similarly influenced female criminality (Steffensmeier and Schwartz, n.d). The issue of increase in rate and change in pattern of female crime in Nigeria is alarming. This is because women by their nature are bearers and nurturers of children; and the social responsibilities that go with these biological and social functions demand that they should be worthy in character. Over the years, societies devised ways and means of controlling crime and dealing with those who deviate from its norms and values. In pre-colonial times women were more or less restricted to their traditional social roles. The communal system of living together added to the internal and external mechanism for crime control, (mainly of ridicule and public disgrace) kept the level of criminal activities by women low. With the coming of westernization (money, economy and emergence of private property) anchored to colonial period, some women began to seek employment outside the home. With increased labour force participation for them some had the opportunity of getting involved in criminal activities (Adler, 1975; Simon, 1975).

Some theories claim that the female role limits offending. Persons (1937) as cited in Igbo (2007) claims that women tend to take up the expressive role in a family-providing emotional support and caring for children as a full-time job, rather than seeking paid work. Due to this obligation, women are seen as having less opportunity to commit crime, being required to stay at home, caring for children. However, nowadays we cannot assume that such obligations are a deterrent against committing crime. New technologies (such as the internet) enable everyone to commit crime. A woman can be at home looking after her children and at the same time she can be cheating innocent people on websites such as Ebay, or even committing identity theft or fraud.

Person's theory is obviously quite a dated theory, and we must take into account that now many women work and many men stay at home to look after children. The idea of joint conjugal roles and dual burden mean that we cannot blame the lower figure of female criminality when compared to males' completely on the female role. Parsons would also say that women are socialised from an early age into accepting their gentle or caring roles. They are also more closely observed throughout their youth, more likely than males to be chaperoned. However, from a contemporary point of view, this is not always the case. Ferdinand (1970) looks at the increase in female risk-taking behaviour, and the new ladette culture where young women want to be seen as anything but the typical stereotype of a woman. Does a traditional female role as described by Parsons (1937) limit female criminality? A woman with children loses more by committing crime, because if she is caught and sent to prison, her children will probably be put into care, or at least be very strongly affected by

the loss of their mother. However, attachment and commitment are only 50 percent deterrence for committing crime while the other half can be anchored to Freud (1927) contribution, which posit that criminality is a perversion of, or rebellion against biologically natural female role centered on mother and other female attributes. For him, female criminality is an eloquent testimony of the ‘masculinity complex’ or what has been described as ‘penis envy’ and envy of male dominance by females (Igbo, 2007).

Finally, criminology has for most feminist writers and researchers been a constraining rather than a constructive and creative influence. Theories of criminality have been developed from male subjects and validated on male subjects. While there is nothing wrong with this, the problem is that these theories have been extended generally to include all criminals, defendants and prisoners and was assumed that these theories would apply to women; most do not appear to do so. Since women are not expected to be criminal and if they are, they may be described as mad not bad woman. What is clear is that prior to now, women were committing crimes but most of which were not recorded (Feminism and Crime, 2009). In addition, women are involved in certain crimes that are this days ascribed to them, such crimes are: Prostitution, child trafficking, abortion, drug trafficking among others. The incrimination of this act contributed to the increase in female criminal population. According to Pollock-Byrne (1990):

The extent of female crime probably approximated that of males, but due to its masked character, female crime was more likely to go undetected. In addition, the types of crimes women commit: shoplifting, domestic thefts, prostitution, abortions, perjury, among others, are under-represented in crime statistics. These crimes are easily concealed and seldom reported; even when these crimes are detected and reported, women are less likely than men to be arrested or prosecuted, this is as a result of double standard favourable to women and because women usually play accomplice or less overt roles when co-offending with men.

Contemporary explanation of female criminality was summarized into nine correlated points by Steffensmeier and Schwartz (n.d), the duo reviewed hypotheses and evaluate them based on the findings of empirical data. Below are their submissions:

Law and the Organisational Management of Crime: Change in female arrest trends are due to “less biased” or more efficient official responses to criminality rather than to actual changes in criminal behaviour among females.

Net widening and changes in law: Changes in law enforcement and in statutory law toward targeting less serious forms of law-violating (especially for violence) has increased the pool of female offenders at risk for arrest, since females are disproportionately involved in the less serious forms of law-violating. A more punitive political environment has been an important factor in the net widening process.

Gender equality and female emancipation: The improved status of women, particularly their advances in the paid workforce, offers females more desire and opportunity to commit crime.

Increased economic marginalisation of women: Higher levels of economic insecurity faced by large sub-groups of women in American society increases the pressure to commit (especially) consumer-based crimes.

Increase inner-city community disorganisation: A growing detachment of many inner-city minorities from mainstream institutions, like education and employment, leads to weakened social controls and to adaptive strategies that include crime. The effects of weakened social controls are especially detrimental to female conformity.

Expanded opportunities for female-type crimes: Shifts in pattern of productive activity, including increased consumerism and the availability of consumer goods and greater reliance on a credit-based system, have expanded opportunities for “female-type” crimes more rapidly than “male-type” crimes.

Changes in the underworld: Recent changes in the criminal underworld, such as the reduced supply of male crime partners due to increased incarceration rates and the emerging dominance of drug trafficking, have augmented the prospects for female involvement.

Trends in drug dependency: Drug addiction amplifies income-generating crime for both sexes, but more so for females than males. Also, the likely incapacitation effects of locking up chronic, high-risk male offenders has opened up slots for females in drug and other crime networks while also tending to diminish overall levels of male offending.

Crime prevention programmes targeting male offenders: Implementation of crime prevention programmes aimed at male offenders has reduced male offending for some crimes, thereby narrowing the gender gap.

Female Offenders Today

Pollak (1961) argues that females are as criminally minded as their male counterparts, regardless of the indications of official criminal statistics. The

low rate of females arrested, prosecuted and convicted for crimes is largely a result of the low rate of reporting and detection of their crime as well as the leniency shown to them by law enforcement agents. Female crimes such as abortion, lesbianism, infanticide and poisoning of their husbands and boyfriends are not often reported. They are not easy to detect and for conviction to be made. This is because these crimes are generally hidden or masked and therefore witnesses and evidence are not easily available. Also, law enforcement agents submit that, females are naturally assumed to be: humble, innocent, sympathetic and harmless, and they are not likely to engage in crime. In contrast to this assumptions, females are now actively involved in all categories of crimes and are in some cases recognised not only as gang or group leaders but also as recidivists.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

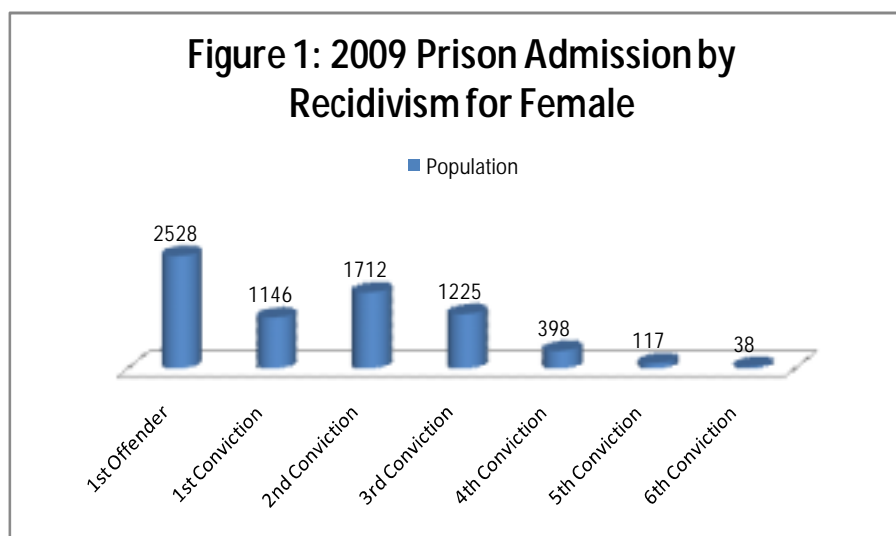
Table 1 supports the assertion that there is an upsurge in female criminality by indicating an increase of 1001, representing 16.4 percent increase in the number of admission into the prison between 2007 and 2009. Further probe into the data presented on table 1 revealed that female criminality is not only on the increase numerically, but also on the increase in the severity of offences committed, because in 2007 female offenders charged for capital offences (armed robbery, robbery and murder) are 720 representing 11.7 percent, while in 2009 there is 3.5 percent increase in the number of female offenders admitted into Nigerian prisons, represented by 1087 (15.2%). This data indicates that women are not only committing crimes that are ascribed to them as noted by Feminism and Crime (2009) but are now competing seriously with their male counterpart. They are also competing their equality with men in this direction. Contrary to Parsons (1937) as cited in Igbo (2007) asserting that women are less likely to commit crime due to their cultural placement, table 1 indicates that female offenders' population is on the increase with 6163 offenders recorded for 2007, and 7164 for 2009, while their male counterpart recorded reduction from 153251 in 2007 to 149187 in 2009 representing 7164 less of 2007 population. A probe further to investigate whether the population of female criminals is as a result of mere chance or it is a reflection of a career choice called for the review of prison admission by recidivism for female category. Figure 1 provides a clear picture of reality.

Table 1: Prison Admissions according to Offences

Offences	2009			2007		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Dept	3043	168	3211	448	15	463
Arson	2058	170	2228	2906	5	2911
Affray	1518	155	1673	4686	277	4963

Assault	6080	457	6537	7377	225	7602
Murder	10914	505	11419	10204	263	10467
Treason	269	16	285			
Sedition	142	15	157	4		4
Abduction	2041	146	2187	350	3	353
Smuggling	2026	138	2164	6164	195	6359
Immigration	2682	253	2935	537	15	552
Stealing	33749	1209	34958	43584	3156	46740
Robbery	15787	340	16127	8343	251	8594
Armed Robbery	14440	242	14682	10568	206	10774
Sex Offence	3897	265	4162	3505	37	3542
Traffic Offence	2516	135	2651	6383	10	6393
Currency Offence	1462	131	1593	619	25	644
Indian Hemp Offence	5587	268	5855	11561	74	11635
Contempt of Court	5392	165	5557	2842	116	2958
Unlawful possession of arms	3308	174	3482	3516	7	3523
Forgery & Altering	2365	114	2479	2571	45	2616
Escape from lawful custody	1943	134	2077	165	2	167
Against native law & custom	2623	202	2825	2849	139	2988
Unlawful possession of property	3665	180	3845	2164	256	2420
Economic sabotage vandalism	1791	114	1905	3333	44	3377
Human Trafficking	1779	111	1890	4455	484	4939
Criminal Lunatic	1284	56	1340	35	4	39
Cultism/Ritual	1274	173	1447	1353	25	1378
Breach of peace (Riot)	1522	216	1738	3024	6	3030
Other offences	14030	912	14942	9709	278	9987
Total	149187	7164	156351	153255	6163	159418

Source: Nigerian Prison Service (2007; 2009)



Source: Nigerian Prison Service (2009)

Similar to what are revealed on table 1, figure 1 shows that the increase in criminality among female is not as a result of mere chance or mistake but that more female are choosing criminality as a means of livelihood. The graph indicates that, out of 7164 female offenders incarcerated in 2009, only 2528 were first offenders. While 1146 were convicted for the first time, 3480 were

convicted between two to six times. This finding corroborates Steffensmeier and Schwartz (n.d) first assumption that change in female arrest trends are due to “less biased” or more efficient official responses to criminality rather than changes in criminal behaviour among females. This implies that just like men, females have always been involved in criminal activities. This upsurge of female criminality is not without implications, the most visible are:

Destruction of societal socialisation structure: it’s obvious that socialisation is the process by which we learn to become members of a society, both by internalizing the norms and values of society, and also by learning to perform our social roles (as worker, friend, citizen among others) (Scott and Marshall, 2005). This implies that women who spend more time with children than men have much more influence on them than men. As such, if they emit negative vibes, then the nation is set out for ungovernable future generation.

Contribute to norm-less nation: When more women become criminally inclined it is only logical to infer that fewer women are not criminally inclined. In essence, considering their vast population and the important socialisation responsibilities they hold, more less/ill-socialised children and young adult will flood the streets, adding to the already up surged female criminal population. This in turn will return the nations to norm less state where crooked mean of achieving goals suppresses lawful ones.

CONCLUSION AND THE WAY FORWARD

Studies have shown that half of the world is made up of women, yet for most part they do not have equal access to land, credit, technology, education, employment opportunities and political power. Further, evidence suggests that women have become increasingly exposed to poverty during the 1990s. The feminization of urban poverty manifests itself in a disproportionate number of women in informal employment (Naila, 2003), mainly in the less profitable areas of the informal sector; and in casual jobs. A growing number of female-headed households are among those without any source of income and/or without access to a public safety net (for example, healthcare and childcare) (UN Habitat 2000). The implications of this situation are more than that of simple inequity. In every society women play crucial roles, they have pervasive effect on the well-being of their families, communities and local ecosystems. Therefore inequalities that are detrimental to them, be it their physical and mental health, income earning ability, education and decision making power are detrimental to them as well as to the society at large. Government are hereby enjoined to empower more women by providing jobs and discourage

marginalisation of female politicians. The study has shown that there is an observable change in the pattern of female criminality in Nigeria. Most literature and researches on the subject have presented socio-economic conditions as well as societal and environmental influences on the behaviour of women such as urbanization, illiteracy and unemployment as reasons for the shift in pattern.

This work argues that while all these reasons are contributory factors, they cannot adequately explain the shift in pattern and upsurge of female crime. This work submits that women's traditional noneconomic role of child-bearing and childcare has broadened to include economic occupations. The introduction of money economy into the system paved the way for women to seek employment outside their home. As more women get into economic occupations like the men, their crime patterns will become clearer and look like men's. To solve this problem the religious and traditional sectors must brace up to instil morals and righteousness in women by lightening the weakened female role.

The existence of private property has further encouraged economic activities for women. Hence as the social roles of men and women are becoming alike, their criminal activities become less distinguishable from one another. With increasing variety of roles opening to women, their criminal behaviour is expected to increase. This work found that women have shifted from crimes like stealing, infanticide and prostitution to armed robbery, drug trafficking, fraud and other heinous crimes. These crimes were predominantly men's. It is recommended that women be given equal opportunities to struggle, which implies equipping them appropriately in terms of education, skills acquisition, employment opportunities and healthcare as these will minimize their involvement in criminal activities. In addition, religious leaders, traditional rulers, social workers, among others should expose women to the fact that they are first known as mothers before co-workers in any organisation, as such suppress the urge for deviant act. In essence, this process of nurturing the women will in turn nurture the nation.

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