

A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN CRIMINALS IN TURKEY: A CASE STUDY

Hande Şahin, Assistant Professor Dr.
CBU, Turkey

Abstract

This study, through a questionnaire and in-depth interviews, aims to make a sociological analysis of female criminals in the Denizli Open Prison, including their demographic characteristics, family structures, committed crimes and the factors that led to their criminal acts. The questionnaire, composed of 57 questions, has been evaluated in the SPSS program, and in-depth interviews were done with 6 female criminals for a detailed analysis of why the female criminals committed crimes and the factors that led to their behavior. In the study, the concept of crime is accepted as a social fact. The educational backgrounds, ages, families and sub- cultures of the women have been examined and the dynamics of female criminality in Turkey have been cross-examined within the limits of sampling. In the course of the study, it was found that concepts of honor, domestic violence and patriarchal structure have been key concepts of female criminality, and female criminality in Turkey can be understood in terms of these phenomena.

Keywords: Crime, Female criminals, delinquency, Turkey

Introduction

One of the most serious problems in today's world is crime, and this is also true in Turkey. Turkey has its own particular conditions with criminality as a cultural, social, and economic reality. But together with the increasing complexity of human society and the effects of industrialization and globalization, crime in its different forms has become one of the major problems of contemporary societies. The rate of organized crime, international terror, female and juvenile delinquency and other forms of crime increase parallel to industrialization, globalization, and urbanization and immigration. In any daily newspaper, published in anywhere in the world or in Turkey, one can find a significant proportion of space devoted to reports of murder, theft, and other crimes. Alongside

this dramatic increase of the global crime rate, crime has also become a major socio-economic problem in Turkey in recent years.

Recently in Turkey, inequality of income distribution, unemployment and asymmetric power relations in the social structure are on the rise due to the transformations in the broader world. In connection with this reality, some groups become particularly disadvantaged, such as the poor or immigrants. These groups tend to commit crimes much more often than other people. Moreover, women and children become much more at risk because they are more sensitive to external forces as a part of the disadvantaged groups within society, as mentioned above. For this reason, the aim of this study is to examine female delinquency. In this sense, the main problem of this study is the nature of the female criminals in Turkey. The main argument is that there is a direct relation between criminal behavior and social factors such as education, income, the standard of life, and family structure, and therefore, crime can be learned and imitated. Women who are uneducated, unemployed or lacking social and physical resources are more likely to commit crimes. to understand the dimensions of female criminality in Turkey,

Description of Crime and Female Criminality

Crime has been the concern of people since they have been human beings. Ancient Greek philosophers were interested in the reasons of crime: For Plato the resources of the crime are passions, seeking for pleasure and ignorance. On the other hand, despite the fact that he knew that the criminals have become criminals due to environmental factors and also to their tendency, Aristotle had been willing to give hard penalties as they are the enemies of society (Demirbaş, 2001:52). Recent socio-cultural sciences define the acts of human beings named as crime as a deviation from the social norms. A criminal is the person who is not able to have a balance between the social norms and individualistic forces. In addition to this, a separation should be made between the act of crime and general deviated activity. Though it is linked to the deviated character, the behavior mentioned as crime is the result of the historical forces and appears in law” (Dönmezer, 1994: 47) The study of crime has also been caught up in the general trend of re- examining gender in correlation with the transformation of women’s roles in daily life. In the late 20th century, many societies have been characterized by perceived shifts in women’s roles (Harrison, 1983: 86). On the other hand, the female share of criminality has risen in the later 20th century, but self-report studies, victim surveys, observations and other studies broadly tend to confirm the image of crime as a largely male activity.

Female crime that refers to the crimes committed by women. The main aim of this classification is to explore the causes of female crime and make positive prevention. The works on female criminality can be traced back to the late 18th century. Lombroso's book, *Female Offender*, was published in 1895. The book argues that women, as required by their nature, are in fact the defenders of the social order and that the mentioned harmonization forces them to adopt and to be overwhelmed by the social order. It is also argued that women participate in criminal behavior due to some physical incompatibilities. Another argument of Pollak is that, because their lives are limited within the borders of the house, women commit crimes that are difficult to notice and punish, especially prostitution, exhibitionism and abortion (Mannheim, 1965: 701-702).

Another important book published about female criminality after the works of Lombroso is *Sex and Society*, written by W.I. Thomas in 1907. He suggested that any differences in intellectual functioning between the sexes were not a result of brain size, or biological differentials as Lombroso affirmed, but were socially influenced. Thomas divided the sexes into katabolic and anabolic dimensions. For him, men were katabolic, or more rapid consumers of energy, whereas women were anabolic, representing the more constructive part of the metabolic process because they stored energy, as the plants did. All the properties of anabolism and katabolism were indicative of social behavioral differences between the sexes. However, in *The Unadjusted Girl*, published in 1923, Thomas established a break from Lombroso and his own first book. He explored the influences of the social environment on deviant behavior and advanced four basic desires for every human: the desires for security, recognition, new experience and response. Criminality was the desire for new experience. A woman entered prostitution to satisfy a desire for excitement and response (Flowers, 1987: 95).

Works that tried to explain the relationship between women and crime via the socialization and nature of women appeared throughout the 1950s. At the core of these studies lies the fragile, soft and vulnerable nature of women and their limited lives within the borders of the house. During the 1970s and 1980s, the literature on female criminality suffered some changes with an emphasis on dismissing long-standing explanations, exploring economic explanations and studying the criminality of female in relation to the women's movement. The most well-known works of the 1970s are *Sisters in Crime* by F. Adler and *The Contemporary Woman and Crime* by R.J. Simon. Both books focus on the correlation between the social and economic role of women in the society and female criminality.

Freda Adler was the first writer to claim that when the social status of women provides parity with men, their crime patterns and frequency will more seem like those of their male counterparts. She focused on the association between the startling rise in female criminality and the women's liberation movement and new feminism. She described new feminism as a "consciousness-raising" movement and she predicted that, as women drew closer to men socially, they would become more equal on all counts in criminality as well (Flowers, 1987: 101).

Rita Simon made a contribution to studies of female criminality with a detailed summary of the contemporary women's movement. Simon introduced the potential relation of demographic and labor force variables to female criminality and the impact the women's movement had in altering the treatment of women within the criminal justice system. For Simon, due to the increase of women's participation in labor force, their opportunity to commit certain types of crime also increased. This means that women have no greater store of morality than do men. Both men and women have the same propensities to commit crimes, but opportunities for women had been more limited. When their opportunities to commit crime increased, they committed crimes more often (Simon, 1975: 48). It is believed that the increase in the percentage of burglary and ordinary crimes among female criminality in the 1960s and 1970s supports the theories of Simon and Adler.

Another significant contribution to studies of female criminality was made by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, who examined female criminality within the perspective of environmental and biological criminality. The Gluecks' most important contribution to the field of female criminality is *Five Hundred Delinquent Women*, which was published in 1934. It is a detailed study that criminologists made of 500 Massachusetts delinquent girls, from their childhood through parole. The Gluecks compared their backgrounds, social histories and physical and psychological traits. Their main objective was to determine what factors led to female deviance. They found that female criminality resulted in large part from biological and economic factors and an extremely high percentage of delinquent girls came from abnormally large families, were mentally defective and had been arrested mainly for sexual behavior. They also found that criminality was likely to be intergenerational (Glueck and Glueck, 1974: 20-23).

Another scholar who believes that sociological factors are determinant when considering female criminality is Pollak. *The Criminality of Women* was published by Pollak to define female criminality during

postwar years. Pollak combined data from a comprehensive survey of American, British, French and German literature.

Utilizing the international statistics, Pollak tries to examine whether the criminality rate among women will rise as the social and economic equality between sexes improves, and tries to make an international comparison. However, there are problems with his study. For example, Pollak assumed that the socio- cultural and socioeconomic structure of each country included in the sample was the same. As a result, he concluded that the rise in the rate of the social participation of women resulted in a rise in crimes against property (İçli, 2004: 367).

Pollak was influenced by Lombroso and Freud to conclude that female criminality is primarily sexually motivated. Pollak's second assumption is that the crime rate among women is probably equal to that of men, but that female criminality has a masked or hidden character. For, Pollak, females' crimes are inadequately reflected in the statistics. Pollak agreed with Lombroso that women are particularly addicted to crimes that are easily concealed and rarely reported. He gave an example of exhibition as a crime that frequently occurs among females but is not prosecuted. Pollak claimed that the traditional roles assigned to women by culture are ideal for hiding crimes such as sexual offenses against children, and that women are more deceitful than men in their commission of crimes (Flowers, 1989). Hagan and colleagues formed the influential power-control theory of delinquency. Power-control theory stipulates that greater equality in the workplace in authority relations for husbands and wives translates into more egalitarian (in contrast with patriarchal) relations in families. More egalitarian family relations, in turn, result in more similar socialization of sons and daughters, similar preferences for risk, and a smaller gender differential in delinquency (Hagan, 1987: 788-80). This is a common situation for both egalitarian and single-parent families. The result of this situation is that the liberty of girls rose among the lower classes while father-dominant families are extremely limited, and thus the rate of participation in crime is quite low for them (İçli, 2004: 368). Apart from the approaches explaining female criminality through the liberation of women, biological factors and power-control theories, there are theoreticians that try to explain female criminality via the demographic structure of the society and the share of males and females in the population. The works of South and Messner, and Guttentag and Secord, are considered among the studies conducted within this framework.

Methodology

This study is composed of qualitative and quantitative parts. The female prisoners in Turkey constitute the population of the study, and the

female prisoners in the Denizli Open Prison constitute the sample of the study. Sixty of the 87 incarcerated women agreed to answer the questionnaire. First, the 87 women were grouped into fours, and then they were asked to commit to join the study, group by group, in a room for leisure. Each was asked about the study, but only 60 agreed to participate, and only after they were told that no names would be collected during the study. The questionnaire consists of 57 questions; of these, 7 are open-ended and 15 questions are designed to examine the demographic features of the respondents. Other questions are related to the personal history of the women offenders and the social conditions and quality of life of their families, the effects of urban transformation on their lives, and their crimes and why they committed those crimes. The age, education level, income and history of women are the main independent variables of the present study.

Findings

The findings in this part of the study indicate that female criminality is gradually becoming more of a social problem. The number of female criminals between 1990 and 2000 increased by 2.8 fold. In line with the findings of the academic studies conducted in Turkey and the general population censuses, a preliminary profile regarding female convicts can be drawn. The majority of the female convicts are primary school graduates or only literate, have been convicted for murder or simple theft, have been subjected to violence from their families or husbands and are predominantly young adults or middle-aged. The findings of this study also support this profile.

Demographic data about the participants of the study are as follows: Female criminals in Denizli Open Prison are generally middle-aged, married, housewives who graduated from primary school. Their families generally have rural origins. The majority of them came from large families. Another main aim of the study was to discuss the reasons for the crimes of female convicts in Turkey, with the help of the sample from Denizli Open Prison. Therefore, three questions included in the “aims” section of the study are related to each other. Why did they commit crimes? Which factors pushed individuals to criminal behavior? What kind of crimes do female criminals generally commit? Answers to all these questions constitute an original side of the study and represent the unique structure of female criminality in Turkey.

According to the findings of the study, one of the major reasons for the crimes committed by female convicts is domestic violence. Domestic violence is a fact which is learned within the family by modeling. In the in-depth interviews, it was seen that female criminals who killed their

husbands had been beaten by their husbands and other members of their families, such as mother-in-law, their own parents or older brothers. Interestingly, these people had been also beaten before by different people in their lives. Therefore, domestic violence can be accepted as a key determinant for the existing of violence. Females who have been abused physically and verbally for long years can go mad. For this reason, they can murder their husbands as a result of unplanned and sudden insanity. In the cases of A1, A2 and A3, all the women had been beaten by men for many years. They had been victims of domestic violence.

Demographics of respondents

Variable			Variable	
Age			Total income of parents (in new	
18-24			less than 300 thousand	
25-34			between 300 - 500	
35-44			between 500 thousand -	
45 and older			1 million and above	
Birth Place			5	
City	1	5.0	What was your mother's	
Township			laborer	
Village			agricultural laborer	
Marital Status			official	
Single			own business	
Married			housewife	
Divorced			unemployed	
Widowed			retired	
Do you have any			marginal	
Yes			What is your	
No			laborer	
			agricultural laborer	
Do you have sisters or			official	
No			own business	
1-2			housewife	
2-4			unemployed	
5-6			student	
5 and above			marginal	
How many			What was your	
One - Three			laborer	
Four - Seven			agricultural laborer	
Eight and above			official	

What is your			own business	
not literate			unemployed	
literate, not graduated			retired	
graduated from			marginal	
graduated from			What is your	
graduated from high			laborer	
graduated from			agricultural laborer	
Educational Level of			official	
not literate			own business	
literate, not graduated			retired	
graduated from			other	
graduated from				
graduated from				
Educational Level of				
not literate				
literate, not graduated				
graduated from				
graduated from				
graduated from high				
graduated from				

The in-depth interviews also showed that the women who have been subjected to domestic violence, either from their husbands or other members of the family, may commit crimes to protect themselves or because of rage, either while they were subject to violence or as a result of being subjected to violence for a long time. The violence exerted on women has a multi-dimensional character. Sometimes, verbal assaults from their mother-in-laws or other members of the family may leave serious scars on the women. Incidences of incest, either involving the woman or her children, are an extreme kind of violence and result in crimes like murder to protect herself and her children. In case of A4, she wanted to protect her sons from their father, who threatened to kill them.

The second most important reason for the crimes committed by women is honor. This is a major point that differentiates female criminality in Turkey from that of the West and the US. While the increasing female criminality in Europe and in the US is explained by the liberalization of women, in Turkey social pressure is a major factor in female criminality. Every region and thus every sub-culture has its own norms regarding women. In line with these norms, women who consider their honor to be damaged may commit crimes in order to clear themselves of blame. One of the fundamental reasons for this situation is that the concept of honor in Turkey is primarily related to the female body.

Women consider their own honor harmed even when their husbands cheat on them.

Honor is also learned within the family and sub-culture, like domestic violence. The case of A5 is an extreme example of honor. Although it was A5's daughter who was forced into incest and sexual intercourse by her father, again it was the daughter whom members of the family tried to kill. Also, A5 was excluded from the family because she killed her husband. In this process, her ex-husband had never been accused of his own crimes.

Throughout the study, it was seen that social control has a significant influence on female criminality. The strictness of this control is directly related to the women's feeling of pressure. It was seen case of A1, who was considered responsible for not having a child, being directly blamed and made subject to various types of violence. Learning is also important for the gaining of social norms. In this sense, it can be claimed that social control is also learned, like honor and domestic violence. The weakness of social control can be a determining factor in female criminality, but when it is too much, it can also be a factor pushing women towards crime.

Other factors that are considered significant in female criminality throughout the study are education and learning. These factors are not influential by themselves, but are determining factors of female criminality when they are joined by other factors. In the case of A2, who was convicted for terror crime, the low level of education in the family left the family members and particularly children open to dangers from outside. A2 had not known anything about terror or state before she was kidnapped by the terror organization. She had been educated about terror for long years, and then she became a terrorist. However, education cannot be a single factor. As in the example of A6, who used to work as a pharmacist and was convicted for document fraud, the increase in education level can be a facilitating factor for engagement in white-collar crime. The rate of white collar crime is very low among women with low education levels.

Learning was also seen to be a significant factor in female criminality. The perceptions of female convicts who were raised in social environments where certain types of crime were considered normal under certain circumstances were found to share similar views of crime themselves. For example, a woman raised in a village where murder for honor is considered normal believed that murder is a crime that can be committed when necessary. Or, as found in the in-depth interview with the Roma woman, when crime is committed in the close environment or by a family member, it sets a model for the children and facilitates their

committing crime when they get older. The fact that 36.7 percent of the participants had a relative in their family who was convicted for a crime strengthens this argument. However, as indicated before, it is difficult to explain crime with a single reason. A similar situation holds also for female criminality.

Conclusion:

The study included different reasons or factors that can be related to female criminality. However, all these factors can only set the foreground for crime within their own contexts and when they are joined by other factors. It is impossible to make statements such as “a low education level is a reason for female criminality,” or to make generalizations such as “women commit crime only after they learn about it.” The study discusses the reasons and factors that may have a determining influence upon female criminality. However, a better understanding of female criminality and more detailed analyses of the issue depends on the increase of studies to be conducted in the field. Increase in the number of such studies will also provide benefits for designing policies aimed to prevent female criminality and some arrangements in this regard. The study aimed to make a contribution, although limited, to the literature on female criminality in Turkey, and to understand the unique conditions of female criminality in Turkey. Understanding female criminality requires determining these unique conditions.

References:

- Demirbaş, Timur. *Kriminoloji*, Seçkin Yayıncılık, Ankara, 2001
- Flowers, Barri. “Woman and Criminality” *The Woman as Victim, Offender and Practitioner*, America:Greenwood Press, 1987
- Glueck, Sheldon., Glueck, Eleneour., *Five Hundred Delinquent Women*, NY : Alfred,1974
- Simon, Rita. *The Contemporary Women and Crime*, D.C: Government Printing Office, 197
- Hagan, John. Gillis A., Simpson J., *Class in the household: power- control theory of gender and delinquency*. *Am. J Sociol.* 92: 788-816, 1987.
- Harrison, Brian. *A Hundred Years Ago*, London: Allen Lone, 1983.
- İçli, Tülin. *Kriminoloji*, Ankara: Martı Kitabevi, 2004.
- Mannheim, H., *Comparative Criminology: A Text Book*,London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965