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# the invisible woman

Gender, Crime,  
and Justice



J O A N N E   B E L K N A P



# The Invisible Woman

Gender, Crime, and Justice

**JOANNE BELKNAP**

University of Cincinnati



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*This book is dedicated with the deepest admiration to*

*Jacqueline Gibson-Navin  
The Light Center  
Columbus, Ohio*

*for her work to help women in prison, women  
coming out of prison, and girls society has forgotten  
who are heading to prison.*



## Preface

I was about nine years old when my mother brought my brothers, my sister, and me to a large toy store to buy one of my older brothers “The Visible Man” for his birthday. For weeks, he had been looking forward to owning the model, which was a clear plastic statue that stood about a foot high, came apart, and had removable internal organs as well as a skeleton. All of us were fascinated with this concept, but then a funny thing happened when we got to the store. “The Visible Woman” seemed infinitely more interesting than “The Visible Man.” Not only did she seem more dimensional, but she had two different stomachs: a nonpregnant stomach and a pregnant stomach. There were more parts to play with, and there was also a little fetus that could be put inside of her large, round tummy. Apparently my brother also decided she was more interesting because he picked her instead of “The Visible Man.” I certainly found her more fascinating than my stick-thin Barbie doll with conical breasts, whom I could never imagine looking like. “The Visible Woman” looked human, strong, *and* female.

When I decided to write a book on women and crime, I was struck by the recurring theme of women’s and girls’ everyday invisibility in society, in crime, and in the crime-processing system. If women are represented, it is often in stereotypical, passive, or sexual images. I remembered the model my brother had gotten for his birthday, and how the “visible” woman seemed strong, fascinating, and real. The title of this book reflects the focus on women’s invisibility while the contents attempt to make them visible with descriptions of the lives, experiences, and strengths of real women.

I think of the many women I have met in prison who are forgotten in society and in the crime-processing system; sadly, these women often are forgotten by their young children as well. When I visit or interview women in prison, I am often struck with how normal these women seem, not scary and repulsive as represented in the media (if they are represented at all). These women face deplorable conditions and desperate situations. Who will look after their children? Can they get counseling to deal with the incest and battering in their pasts? Can they get decent dental care? Can they get mammograms for breast lumps? Are their lawyers really working on their appeals? Can they get tampons or sanitary pads when they are menstruating? The strength of many of these women under these conditions is humbling. As this book describes, women make up such a small proportion of prisoners that they are often invisible and their needs are ignored.

I think of the women police officers and jail and prison guards I have interviewed and met, who have reported intensely hostile working environments, created by some of their male coworkers and supervisors. Often, even in those cases where they felt sufficiently empowered to formally report their experiences to officials within the organization, nothing was done to the offending men. One ex-policewoman who spoke to one of my classes reported some of the worst sexual harassment experiences I had ever heard. She had considerable documentation of the numerous ways and times her male coworkers and supervisor had violated the sexual harassment laws, including displays of pornographic pictures with her face pasted on them and taped obscene phone calls to her home. Unfortunately, this woman was further victimized when she brought these offenders to court on sexual harassment charges. The male judge agreed with the defense attorney that the case should be a mistrial, since this 39-year-old woman also reported having been raped when she was 16. Apparently, she had already been allotted her one “credible” rape.

This book documents not only the high rates of sexual abuse of girls and women, but also the increased likelihood of women survivors of child sexual abuse being sexually victimized again as adults. This book also traces the unfair treatment that sexual abuse victims often experience in the crime-processing system. The original and revictimization rates of females have long been ignored or misunderstood; thus it is hardly surprising that official responses to these victims is often lacking at best and damaging at worst.

Regarding the invisibility of women victims, I think about my classes where women have regularly written in their journals about incest, stranger and date rapes, sexual harassment at jobs they needed to keep, and the battering and stalking by boyfriends, ex-boyfriends, husbands, and ex-husbands. These women, understandably, rarely feel comfortable discussing these victimizations in classes, yet often do.

When women are made visible, it is often in stereotypical and offensive ways. For instance, one of my students, whose batterer (her second husband) shot and killed her first husband (who had come to help her) in front of her children, was asked about her sexual history when her batterer went to trial

for the murder. Not only is the rate of women battering unrecognized in society, but also the many useless responses to women's cases such as in my students case, is unknown. This book describes the high rates of woman battering, as well as a crime-processing system that has been reluctant to take action against batterers. Moreover, it presents the risks of battered women being murdered by their batterers, or killing their batterers in self defense and subsequently spending many years or life in prison, invisible to society at large.

Like my brother's toy model, women in society and the crime-processing system are often invisible, but they are also often strong and capable. The chapters ahead focus on the theme of women's invisibility, and the book concludes on a note of hope and optimism regarding changes that have advanced the visibility and status of women and girls in the crime-processing system.

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## PART I

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# Introduction





# Emergence of Gender in Criminology

**T**his book presents the current state of women and girls in *criminology* (the study of crime) and *criminal justice* (the processing of victims and offenders). Whereas criminology is concerned with developing theories on what causes crime, criminal justice focuses on workers in the criminal justice system and how decisions are made about victims and offenders. To understand the current state of women and girls and how gender relates to crime and criminal justice, it is first necessary to comprehend the historical evolution of the status of women and girls in the home, society, and the workplace. Therefore, this book includes relevant historical factors that have affected the status of women and girls in crime today. Finally, this book examines successes in effecting change for women and girls as victims, offenders, and professionals in the criminal justice system.

The term *criminal justice* is most often used to describe the practices of workers in the system (such as police, judges, and prison staff), as well as the processing and treatment of crime victims and offenders. This book will replace the term *criminal justice* with the term *crime processing*, given that there is little evidence that the criminal “justice” system is just or fair in its treatment of female victims, offenders, and workers. In fact, the lack of justice for women and girls is the focus of this book.

The purpose of this chapter is to expose readers to an overall view of the important concepts behind women and crime. These include a presentation of females’ invisibility in criminology and crime-processing studies, relevant concepts and definitions, and an understanding of how the images of women and



girls in society have affected their experiences as victims, offenders, and professionals in society and in the crime-processing system.

## INVISIBILITY OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN CRIME

The major areas covered in this book are (1) women and girls as offenders, (2) women and girls as victims, and (3) women professionals working in the crime-processing system. As stated previously, a common characteristic of women and girls in these areas is their *invisibility*. This section briefly explains how females' experiences have been denied or ignored. Moreover, this section discusses how women and girls do not always fit neatly into the categories of offenders, victims, and professionals in the crime-processing system. Rather, there is a great deal of overlap. Given the prevalence of violence against women and girls in society, it is not surprising that many women professionals and offenders are survivors of male violence.

Any discussion on the invisibility of women and girls in the study of crime must address the current resistance to this topic in academic research as well as in the classroom. It is apparent that research often neglects to include females. In conducting the research for this book, the author found it frustrating to search through mainstream journals (and some books) to find out if women and/or girls were included in the research questions or samples. For example, studies with male-only samples rarely identified this in the title, while studies with female-only or female and male samples almost consistently reflected this in their titles. If women were excluded from the study, then most authors perceived no need to include "male" in the title. Moreover, a recent feminist analysis of education in "criminal justice" departments noted that although feminism has had clear effects on the curriculum, pedagogy, and campus climate, "it has not been enough to transform criminology/criminal justice education so that gender is a central organizing theme. Feminist criminology/criminal justice education seems to remain at the margins of the 'male-stream' [a reflection that 'mainstream' is really about males]" (Renzetti 1993, 219).

### Women and Girls as Offenders

Most criminology theories are concerned with the etiology of crime and thus focus on factors related to offending, primarily male juvenile offending. Until the late 1970s, it was highly unusual for these studies to include girls (or women) in their samples. Although gender is the strongest factor indicating a person's likelihood to break the law, these (almost exclusively male) researchers rarely thought it was necessary to include females in their samples. The irony is that "sex, the most powerful variable regarding crime has been virtually ignored" (Leonard 1982, xi). Leonard goes on to say that criminology theories were constructed "by men, about men," and explain male behavior rather than human behavior. Furthermore, "[e]xploring why women commit fewer crimes