

Criminal statistics and female crime: a critique

By Monica Walker

In their article entitled "Sexism in Official Statistics" in Demystifying Social Statistics Ann and Robin Oakley refer to an article by Anne Campbell (New Society, January 1977) in which it is claimed that female crime is grossly underestimated in official statistics, compared with male crime. Campbell states: "Although girls are involved in almost as many crimes as boys they appear in official statistics about an eighth as frequently". It is unfortunate that in an article advocating a careful examination of published statistics the authors did not scrutinise Campbell's article more carefully. She does not clarify the meaning of the statistics that she used in her comparison of male and female crime, and her overall conclusion is quite unjustified.

She states that boys "appear in official statistics" eight times as frequently as girls; it is not clear what she means by this or where the figure was obtained from. Criminal statistics, 1975 (which presumably Campbell used) shows that the ratio of the number of boys under 17 who were found guilty of an offence, or cautioned, to the number of girls, was 4.9:1. For court appearances only the ratio of numbers found guilty was 8.6:1. (For the whole age range the latter ratio was 5.7:1). The court statistics are based on counting each person once for each court appearance, even if they were found guilty of several offences at the hearing; besides this sometimes other offences are "taken into consideration" in sentencing. Figures for these other offences were published for the first time in 1976, so Campbell presumably did not include them in her calculation. For 1977, for all offences for which persons were sentenced the ratio of boys under 17 to girls under 17 was 9.1:1 (all ages 5.3:1). No figures are available for the number of offences for which persons were cautioned; assuming it was always for just one offence the total number of offences committed by boys under 17 to girls was 6.1:1 (for all ages the figure is 5.6:1).

The usual criticism of official statistics is that they are based only on offences where the offender was detected, and they are therefore biased. Campbell apparently believes that her research showed that females commit almost as many crimes as males. In so far as one can understand her methodology, this is certainly not the case. She carried out a self-report study of 105 adolescent girls, which consisted of giving them a list of about 30 offences and asking them to tick those they had ever committed. She then compared her results with those of a study by West and Farrington (reported in Who Becomes Delinquent?) carried out some years earlier in London. She does not apparently compare the number of offences ever committed by the girls with the number ever committed by the boys, but compares the number of different offences ticked out of the arbitrary list of about 30. She states "In the overall average of offences the male to female self-admission rate was 1.12 to 1 - a far cry from the seven to one ratio that is put about". However, if some of the offences had been excluded, or described in more detail or more had been included, the result would have been different. Besides this and assuming, of course, that the persons remembered and confessed to all the offences committed, if they were committed before the age of 10 they were not technically offences. There is simply no reason to suppose Campbell's figure bears any relation to the official statistics; they are measuring entirely different things.

Returning to "Sexism in Official Statistics" the authors are surely unjustified in saying (p.187) that "It is always the case that in relation to men, women are said to be in receipt of less than their "fair share" of justice, opportunities or whatever resource is in question". This statement is rather ambiguous, but it is certainly the case that a higher proportion of girls than boys who are caught are cautioned, so that females appear to be treated more favourably than men in this respect. The seriousness and circumstances of the offences would need to be examined before it can be concluded that there is discrimination between the sexes.