



The Real Bad Girls Club: A History of Women and Violent Crime

Rebecca Scott

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During the 19th Century, in every study of serious crime ever conducted, men's and women's criminality has appeared different. Women were always accused of fewer, and different, crimes from men. Women accounted for only 21% of the defendants tried between 1674 and 1913, but this figure masks a significant chronological change. While women accounted for around 40% of the defendants from the 1690s to the 1740s (and, highly unusually, over half the defendants in the first decade of the eighteenth century), over the course of the period this proportion declined significantly, so that by the early nineteenth century only 22% of defendants were women and by the early twentieth century the proportion had declined to 9%. By this point serious crime had come to be perceived as essentially a masculine problem. Increasingly, female deviance was perceived as a consequence and aspect of sexual immorality rather than crime, and was addressed through other agencies of protection and control. Throughout history, female defendants accounted for a significant proportion of the accused in only a small number of offenses, particularly certain kinds of theft (pick-pocketing, shoplifting, and receiving stolen goods), kidnapping, prostitution, and offenses surrounding abortion practices. On the other hand, prior to the 18th Century, relatively few women were accused of sexual offenses, murder, break-ins or armed robbery. The explanation of these changes in patterns is complicated. But one thing is certain...times sure have changed.

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