INTRODUCTION

—◆•◆—

Myself (by J., 2010)

I say I love you

But I barely love myself

I say I hate you

But I only hate myself

I say I miss my child

But I barely miss myself

I say I care about you

But I barely care about myself

I'm not saying I don't love you

I just don't love myself

I hate me. I hate my family

So I could try to love you

I want to love you forever through

thick and thin

Till death do us part.

But I have to learn to love myself first.

You say you're going to love me. But

how long will your love last?

I miss loving myself and having

myself.

I want to love myself, and cherish

myself

But where am I to go when I have just

myself.

<div align="right">

—resident on Girls' Unit,
Waxter Children's Center in Laurel, Maryland[1]

</div>

Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman elected to Congress, wisely observed, "The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says, 'It's a girl'" (Hoard, 1973). This was both an important observation and a national call for a clearer focus on girls' lives and girls' problems. More recently, there has been a spate of books on problems that one might argue are unique to girls, largely focused on body issues and popular culture (see Harris, 2004; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Lamb & Brown, 2009). Why the need for a separate discussion of girls' problems? Somehow, in all the concern about the situation of women and women's issues during the second wave of feminism, the girls were forgotten.

Forgetting about girls is easy for adult women to do. After all, because the problems confronting adult women in the workplace and at home are so staggering (sexual harassment, salary inequity, and domestic violence, to name a few), it is difficult to spare energy to consider how their own childhoods shaped who they became and what choices they ultimately faced. Such lack of concern was particularly clear when reviewing the paucity of information on the lives of economically and politically marginalized girls of today's underclass. Coming into the 21st century, this lack of information has facilitated a spate of

---

[1]Reprinted with permission from Kumar (2010, p. 5).

mean-spirited initiatives to control the lives (and especially the sexuality and morality) of young girls, most notably African American and Hispanic girls, who are construed as welfare cheats and violent, drug-addicted gang members (Lopez, Chesney-Lind, & Foley, 2011; Males, 1994; Nichols & Good, 2004).

Consider the recent and racially different depictions of girls' violence and aggression and the media's fascination with "girls gone wild." As this book will document, when dramatic pictures of girls of color carrying guns, committing violent crimes, and wearing bandannas suddenly appeared in the popular media, there were very few careful studies to refute the vivid images. Additionally and without much critical thought, the current attention on "reviving Ophelias" and white girls' "mean girl" associations and deployment of violence also contribute to a characterization of girlhood as riddled with aggression, ferocity, and intragender victimizations (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008). Why? Why this absence of critical thinking about girls, violence, and crime? Criminology has long suffered from what Jessie Bernard has called the "stag effect" (Bernard, 1964, as cited in Smith, 1992, p. 218). Criminology has attracted male (and some female) scholars who want to study and understand outlaw men, hoping perhaps that some of the romance and fascination of this role will rub off. As a result, among the disciplines, criminology is almost quintessentially male.

In recent times, feminist criminology has challenged the overall masculinist nature of criminology by pointing out two important conclusions. First, women's and girls' crime was virtually overlooked, and female victimization was ignored, minimized, or trivialized. Women and girls existed only in their peripheral existence to the center of study—the male world. Second, whereas historical theorizing in criminology was based on male delinquency and crime, these theories gave little awareness to the importance of gender—the network of behaviors and identities associated with the terms *masculinity* and *femininity*—that is socially constructed from relations of dominance, power, and inequality between men and women (Belknap, 2007; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988). Feminist criminology demonstrates how gender matters, not only in terms of one's trajectory into crime but also in terms of how the criminal justice system responds to the offenders under its authority.

Because of the interaction between the stag effect and the relative absence of criminological interest in gender theorizing and girls' issues, this book will show that the study of "delinquency" has long excluded girls' behavior from theory and research. To some extent, adult women offenders have also been

ignored because it seemed clear that women committed less criminal behavior. The one exception to this generalization is prostitution, which probably came in for some scrutiny because the study of sexuality became both academically fashionable and easily marketed in the 1970s (Winick & Kinsie, 1971). But aside from a few titillating books on prostitution, the silence about girl and women offenders was more or less absolute for most of criminology's history. Such a situation, as this book will document, has hidden key information from public view and allowed major shifts in the treatment of women and girls—many on the economic margin—to occur without formidable public discussion and debate. Girls and women do get arrested, tried, and sentenced to prison. In fact, there have been major changes in the way that the United States has handled girls' and women's crime in recent decades that do not necessarily bode well for the girls and women who enter the criminal justice system.

First, for all that they are ignored, girls should no longer be an after-thought in the delinquency equation. In fact, girls remain slightly more than 30% of juvenile arrests in the year 2009 (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2010a). Despite the fact that girls are nearly a third of those brought into the juvenile justice system, they have rarely claimed anywhere near that share of public attention or resources. As an example, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Girls Study Group recently completed a nationwide review of 61 girls' delinquency programs and found that many programs did not complete evaluations and that no program could be rated as effective. Indeed, by the end of their review, most of the programs had lost funding and were no longer in existence (Zahn, 2009). Although the last 15 years have seen a growth in gender-responsive programming as well as national and state conferences gathered to address women offenders' issues, the "get tough on crime" initiatives, particularly for drug offenses, and push for incarceration continue to adversely affect women and girls. In the area of women's crime and punishment, a disturbing reality persists: In 1980, there were about 12,000 women in prison; by 2000, there were more than 85,000; and by 2009, there were 113,000—a nine-fold increase in less than 30 years (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001, 2010a; Maquire & Pastore, 1994, p. 600). Moreover, this imprisonment rate for women continues to grow. In 1990, the incarceration rate for female offenders was 31 out of 100,000 female residents; by 2009, it was 68 out of 100,000 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010b). Currently, more than 1.25 million women are under some kind of criminal justice supervision (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010c).

But why, you might ask, should "normal" people be concerned about the lives of girls and women who become involved with the criminal justice system and end up in prison? What do these people have to do with normal citizens and their daily lives? There are a couple of ways to answer that question. First and most important, these girls and women are not that different from normal people. Gibbons (1983), for example, points out that the majority of those in the criminal justice system are actually "ordinary individuals who, for the most part, engage in sporadic and unskilled crimes" (p. 203). As we shall see, this is especially true of the girls and women who are the focus of this book.

The role played by social control agencies—the police, the courts, the prisons—in labeling and shaping the "crime problem" is frequently underestimated. We also often overlook the important role the concept of criminal as "outsider" plays in the maintenance of the existing social order (Becker, 1963; Schur, 1984). Clearly, harsh public punishment of a few "fallen" girls and women as witches and whores has always been integral to enforcement of the boundaries of the "good" girls' and women's place in patriarchal society. Anyone seriously interested in examining women's crime or the subjugation of women, then, must carefully consider the role of the contemporary criminal justice system in the maintenance of modern patriarchy.

Another question to ponder, particularly as we begin to explore the experiences of women and girls in the criminal justice system, is why crime, particularly violent crime, is almost exclusively a male preserve, and why sexual crime and its buffer charges (such as being a juvenile "runaway" or an adult prostitute) are found so exclusively in the female realm.

As this book will demonstrate, the women whose lives are changed by these labels are often the victims of what might be called "multiple marginality" (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003; Vigil, 1995) in that their gender, race, and class have placed them at the economic periphery of society. Understanding the lives and choices of girls and women who find themselves in the criminal justice system also requires a broader understanding of the contexts within which their "criminal" behavior is lodged. There are important links between girls' problems and women's crime—links that are often obscured by approaches that consider "delinquency" and "crime" to be separate and discrete topics.

Recent research, for example, on the backgrounds of adult female offenders reveals the importance of viewing them as people with life histories. A few facts about the lives of adult women in U.S. prisons make this point very powerfully: Female offenders are three times more likely than their male

counterparts to have a history of abuse, with more than two-thirds of these women reporting the assault happened before they were 18 (Bloom et al., 2003; National Symposium on Female Offenders, 2000). Moreover, one-third of women in state prisons and one-quarter of those in jails report being raped at some point in their lives (Bloom et al., 2003). Other studies have shown that nearly one in five of these women inmates had spent time in the foster care system, that well over half (58%) grew up in homes without both parents present, and the adults abused alcohol and drugs in many of these homes (34%; Snell & Morton, 1994).

Research on the childhoods of adult women offenders reveals how the powerful and serious problems of childhood and adolescent victimization dramatically circumscribe girls' choices. In a number of instances, these same problems set the stage for their entry into youth homelessness, unemployment, drug use, survival sex (and sometimes prostitution), and, ultimately, other more serious criminal acts.

Acts that come to be labeled as delinquent or criminal, as this book will document, are like all other social behaviors—they take place in a world where gender still shapes the lives of young people in very powerful ways. This means that gender matters in girls' lives and that the way gender works varies by the community and the culture into which the girl is born. As we shall see, the choices of women and girls on the margin place them in situations in which they are likely to be swept up into the criminal justice system. Likewise, responses to girls' and women's offending must be placed within the social context of a world that is not fair to women, people of color, or those with low incomes. Because criminology has long been sensitive to the role played by class in crime, it is the introduction of gender and race that now poses new challenges for the field in its attempts to understand women's and men's crime.

The challenge in this book is to keep the criminological focus on the fact that girls and women of different cultures and races live in different situations and, as a result, face different choices than their white counterparts. This also means that in addition to the burdens they shoulder because of their gender (living with sexism), they must shoulder the burdens of racism. Because racism also tends to bring discrimination and poverty, the emphasis on class should not be lost, but it cannot be the only lens through which delinquency and crime are understood (as has historically been the case). Finally, though, the focus on race or culture (difference) should not lead to a "politics of difference" that stresses divisions among women to the exclusion of the

commonalities of their gender or class. Ultimately, an overemphasis on difference (or race or culture), although appearing to be race sensitive, can actually excuse white women's silence about issues that affect their nonwhite counterparts (Barry, 1996).

Whatever the reason, there has certainly been no national outcry about the soaring rates of women's imprisonment—a 757% increase since 1977 (Frost, Green, & Pranis, 2006). Instead, with little or no public discussion, the correctional establishment has gone about the business of building new women's prisons and filling them. Our hope is that this book will help encourage a critical national discussion of this trend and, specifically, that it will provide the best answers we can find to the important questions that surface in discussions about women's crime and punishment. What led these women into criminal behavior? Are today's women offenders more violent than their counterparts in past decades? How could such a change in public policy toward women have happened with so little fanfare? Finally, what advocacy and policy efforts (if any) are being made to reverse this trend in women's imprisonment?

As this book will show, the answers to these questions are not simple, but many of them lie in our public discomfort with girl and woman offenders and the secrecy that accompanies modern punishment. Not only do we rarely think of girls and women who get arrested, we also tend to ignore the places where the people we detain and imprison are kept. Prisons are not places most of us look at, and even the citizens of towns that house the largest of these institutions tend to look the other way when they drive by.

Silence also shrouds those held by these institutions. As this book will document, most of the people we arrest, jail, try, and imprison are poor, and because they are poor, they are without legal resources, without advocates, without a voice. Such silence particularly attends the jailing of women because women are supposed to be "good" and not "bad." Their tragedies, their suffering, and their pain are not news, and most of us want to believe that whatever suffering they do endure is simply their due—that the "system" that processes these people is fair and just. Indeed, if the public gives any thought to crime and punishment, it is generally to complain that the system fails to protect us from crime and is too soft on vicious criminals—whom we imagine to be male, violent, and very much unlike ordinary people.

There is little in our everyday lives to challenge that construction. Every night, we are bombarded with images of egregious and senseless violence, and almost every face of those shown committing these senseless acts is young,

black, and male. What are we to make of these frightening images of anger and violence out of control in our cities?

The first, extremely important point to make about these constructions is that they are grossly untrue. Crime is down, not up, in American society. Despite a recent economic recession and increased unemployment and joblessness, murder rates in 2009 were substantially lower than in 1929 or even 1939 and nearly reflected the low rates seen in the late 1940s and 1950s (FBI, 2010a).

But how can this be true when the media are so full of violence? The sad fact is that our media, particularly our entertainment media, have discovered that violence, unlike humor or drama, travels well. Movies are, first and foremost, increasingly made for an international market, and violence comes cheaper than other forms of "entertainment." The more television our children watch, the more they (and we) come to believe that the scary, mean world they see in the movies exists outside their doors. For example, Romer, Jamieson, and Aday (2003) found that viewing local television news is directly related to increased fear of and concern about crime.

The notion of a mean society is so abetted by local news media that find that "if it bleeds, it leads" journalism takes far less energy than the real work of explaining the complex sources of crime and other social problems. Finally, politicians have discovered the fear of crime and its root cause—unarticulated racism—and have had no qualms about turning this fear/racism to their advantage. *Crime* has become a code word for race, and being tough on crime has become almost a prerequisite for election, with virtually all politicians taking care not to be "out-crimed" by their opponents.

In their rush to appear tough on crime, our leaders have dramatically increased the penalties for virtually every offense in the books, particularly drug offenses. The prisons then exploded not with new, more vicious criminals but with the very same petty offenders who used to receive probation for their deeds. The least visible of these offenders are the women we are now jailing: the fastest-growing jail population (Frost et al., 2006).

So, as we complete the first decade of the 21st century, our nation has the dubious distinction of having the highest incarceration rate in the world (Sentencing Project, 2011). This incarceration frenzy particularly devastates communities of color—racial and ethnic minorities now constitute more than 60% of the prison population (Sentencing Project, 2011). Despite state and federal budget crunches, corrections is an ever-present and ballooning item in government budgets, robbing money from health, education, housing, and

social services. This continuous spending is fueled not by an increase in crime but also by cynical political forces that have exploited the unresolved racial and economic inequities in U.S. society.

How do we begin to challenge the correctional-industrial complex that is rapidly emerging around and feeding on our fear of crime and criminals? First, we must meet the prisoner as a person and listen to her story. As she speaks about her life and her experience of prison, a human face is suddenly superimposed over the mind-numbing figures.

By focusing attention on the girl and woman offender, this book hopes to fuel a public discussion about the unintended victims of our nation's love affair with incarceration—women of color, whose incarceration rate is three times that of white women (Sentencing Project, 2007). By focusing specifically on girls and women who commit crimes, perhaps it will be easier to understand what brought them to prison. By understanding their lives, we will see that spending money to end violence against girls and women will go a long way toward reducing women's crime. We will also see that ending the grinding poverty that is destroying some neighborhoods and families rather than punishing the victims of these forces will do a great deal to reduce girls' and women's crime. Finally, the book will help to end the invisibility of the girl and woman offender. Our ignorance about their lives and their punishments costs us far more than dollars. In our silence, we begin to deny our own humanity and the humanity of those we imprison.