
VOICES FROM WITHIN: WOMEN WHO HAVE BROKEN THE LAW by Evelyn Sommers (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995)

I. WHY DO WOMEN BREAK THE LAW?

Evelyn Sommers provides some explanations to this question. Based on extensive interviews with fourteen women in a medium security prison in Ontario, Sommers analyzed what they told her and came up with some refreshing new insights on this subject. On the basis of this research as well as her experience in working with female offenders, she feels that female offenders are the least understood of all women.

II. WOMEN ARE DIFFERENT

Until recently most research on criminal behaviour was based on men. Women have either been omitted or have been an add on to the research on men. Implicit in much of the research is the assumption that male and female criminality are the same. Sommers asks the reader to rethink old theories based on outdated male models of criminality.

She took an approach to her research that is based on what the women themselves felt had been the factors that led to their lawbreaking. Sommers stresses that research on people cannot be objective. For research to be meaningful it must examine the person in context. She defined the women who are the subjects of the research as the experts and has incorporated their words, their understanding of why they break the law, into this book. Clearly a more objective or "scientific" structure to the research would have yielded a much more superficial result.

In the past, psychologists and psychiatrists developed theories about behaviour without regard for the environment in which the person lives. Taken out of context, women in conflict with the law are seen to be different, abnormal, anomalous and to be feared. Sommers was struck more with the similarity between women in conflict with the law and other women in the community than by the similarity between female and male lawbreakers.

Sommers also challenges some of the traditional theories of social development. According to many old theories, social development is a measure of a person's autonomy and ability to separate. These theories are diametrically opposed to some of the more recent theories on women that emphasize that a woman's development relates to a capacity for obtaining and sustaining relationships. Women's need for attachment and affiliation is often characterized as pathological by mental health professionals whose theoretical base is grounded in past male-oriented models.

III. THEIR BEHAVIOUR MAKES SENSE IN CONTEXT

There is very little research on women as agents of criminal behaviour. Most literature refers to women as victims. Sommers feels this interpretation is far too simplistic and does a disservice to women. She describes women's criminality as

multifaceted; based on psychological, economic, social, legal and historical factors. For example, many of the women in this study were the sole support for their children and their criminal behaviour related directly or indirectly to their feelings of responsibility for their children. How often is responsibility for children even mentioned in treatises on criminality?

When the backgrounds and life experiences of women in conflict with the law are examined it is easier to understand their behaviour. In fact, it often makes perfectly logical sense that women would have chosen to break the law. In our desire to label and separate ourselves from criminals we fail to see the common characteristics between women offenders and ourselves.

IV. FOUR EMERGING THEMES

Sommers articulates a number of central reasons or "themes" as to why women break the law:

A. NEED: PHYSICAL AND/OR EMOTIONAL

The women whose central theme was need spent a great deal of time and energy trying to obtain what they felt they were entitled to have. The emotional and physical deprivation they felt was related to a sense of what they thought everyone else had in contrast to what they had. Several of the women seemed to feel that it was necessary to "keep up appearances" in order to sustain relationships.

B. DISCONNECTION AND THE INFLUENCE OF OTHERS

Almost all the women felt a sense of disconnection from others — disconnection from their mothers, fathers, children and other important people in their lives. Although these women experienced serious disconnections in their lives, the *need* for connection was there. In fact, it became of paramount importance.

However, when disconnection has characterized family relationships, disconnection in future relationships is common. We are all drawn to the safety of the familiar. These women were no different, even when the only relationships that were available to the women were those that were abusive and destructive. As a result, these women often turned to drugs and/or alcohol to give themselves the illusion of connection.

C. ANGER

Sommers describes anger as a secondary emotion born out of an inability to express feelings congruently. Feelings that cannot be tolerated are often replaced by anger. It is a paradox that women whose central theme was anger responded to rejection with anger or violence when what they most wanted was to be connected.

Women who act on their anger do not conform to society's stereotype of a woman and are considered deviant. Women have been prosecuted for behaving in ways that are not consistent with their gender. Lisa Neve is a case in point.

D. FEAR

Fear was present in the stories of all the women, fear of others and fear of themselves.

V. COMMON THREADS

The common threads that bind all the themes together are the centrality of relationships, the importance of empathy and the struggle for empowerment.

The important relationships in the lives of these women were starkly lacking in mutual empathy. As a result, the women were emotionally disconnected in their interactions with others. They attempted to develop or maintain the relationships that were available to them. These were often abusive and exploitive. These women could not achieve the mutual empathy they needed for empowerment. Their disempowerment was reflected in their feelings of need, disconnection, anger and fear. Women in conflict with the law want what other women want — to connect, belong, feel and be effective.

VI. THE MISSING PIECE

One issue which received very little attention by Sommers was that of sexual abuse. According to the vast majority of literature on women in conflict with the law, the rate of early childhood sexual abuse is extraordinarily high. The Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton published a similar study based on interviews with twelve women. Sexual abuse was found to be the single most significant factor in this study of women in conflict and was seen to be a crucial factor in the progression toward criminal behaviour. A few of the women in Sommer's book spoke of their sexual abuse, but Sommers analyzes it only briefly in the context of disconnection. I found this surprising.

While many of the stories sound familiar to me, it is interesting to note, however, that there are regional differences. If this study were done in Alberta, it is probable that the vast majority of the women would be Aboriginal and their stories would have reflected more poverty and abuse than the women described in Sommer's book.

VII. PUTTING IT INTO PERSPECTIVE

Sommers refers to a study indicating that lawbreaking occurs in equal measure in all social classes. It is, however, women from lower socioeconomic groups that are more liable to criminalization; that is, while they are no more likely to break the law, they are more likely to be prosecuted and find themselves in prison. In this context, this and

all other material on criminal behaviour must be seen for what it is — an analysis of only a small slice of society's lawbreakers.

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