

## Change in Pattern of Female Crime in Owerri, Nigeria 1980 - 2000

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**Abstract:** There has been unprecedented rise as well as sophistication in crime commission in Nigeria of which women are becoming actively involved. The interest in this study was inspired by the observation that women have moved from traditional crimes of prostitution and stealing to more heinous crimes. The study examined the factors that have led to this shift in pattern. The political economy theory was used as a guide. A case study approach was adopted involving one hundred and thirty five (135) women who had been imprisoned in Owerri Federal Prisons since 1980; out of which seventy three (73) of the inmates who were in the prison in 2000 were interviewed. Also three hundred and forty-eight (348) respondents for assessment of people's perception of the change in pattern of female crime were interviewed. The data was subjected to both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. The study observed that the change in pattern of female criminality in Owerri and Nigeria as a whole was not only due to poverty and the worsening economic conditions in Nigeria, but also as a result of the change in the traditional roles of bearing and rearing of children to economic occupations. Drug trafficking, armed robbery and fraud were observed to be new crimes among female prisoners within the study area. The study suggests that there is the need to encourage women in the form of education, skills acquisition and employment opportunities to reduce poverty in order to ameliorate female criminality and save our society from moral decadence.

**Key words:** Change, pattern, female, crime, prisoners, owerri

### INTRODUCTION

Since the last two decade, Nigeria has been witnessing unprecedented rise as well as sophistication in criminal activities. Hardly any day passes without reports of crime and criminal activities in the news media as they happen in the different parts of the country. The new crime wave cuts across all sections of the society, involving men, women and children.

Presumed changes in the pattern of crimes by women are drawing the attention of the popular media as well as sociologists and criminologists. Most of the early studies of female crime concentrated on two or three main areas: witchcraft, infanticide and prostitution. In recent times, inquiry into female crime has broadened to include such other crimes as drug trafficking, armed robbery and white-collar crimes in government offices.

A synopsis of crime reports offers some evidence of change in pattern of criminal behaviour by women in the country. It was reported in Punch Newspapers (6/10/96) that out of two hundred and forty people condemned to death at Enugu in 1996; seven were women. These female criminals received their death sentences for committing murder at different places and for different reasons. Further, many Nigerian women have been arrested in Europe and America over drug trafficking and other social vices. It was also reported in the Guardian Newspaper (14/10/96) that Nigeria women and others were arrested by United States police over N2.08 billion drugs, and the ring was led by Nigeria women. Also the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) arrested a woman

with twenty-one bags of Indian hemp at Plateau State, Vanguard (15/10/97). The woman a mother of eleven children claimed she had been in the business for over three years.

The issue of secret cults has become a very big problem in Nigerian society; particularly in the universities and polytechnics. We now have reports all female secret cults called 'Black Bra' and 'Daughters of Jezebel' in some tertiary institutions in Nigeria (Champion Newspapers 20/9/97). Women rarely got involved in these types of crimes some two or three decades ago.

The issue of increasing rate and change in pattern of female crime in Nigeria is disturbing. This is so because women by their nature are bearers and nurturers of children; and the social responsibilities that go with these biological and social functions demand that they should be worthy in character. Over the years, society devised ways and means of controlling crime and dealing with those who deviate from its norms and values. In pre-colonial times women were more or less restricted to their traditional social roles. The communal system of living added to the internal and external mechanism for crime control, (mainly of ridicule and public disgrace) kept the level of criminal activities by women low. With the introduction of a money economy and emergence of private property during the colonial period, some women began to seek employment outside the home. With increased labour force participation for them some had the opportunity of getting involved in criminal activities (Adler, 1975; Simon, 1975).

From a political economy approach, it is well known that attitudes, beliefs, motivations and other forms of consciousness do not exist in a vacuum, nor are they mere accidents. They cannot be understood or meaningfully discussed if they are dissociated from these historical conditions. They evolve over a long period in the course of man's interaction with his human and physical environment (Ake 1981). The topic for this paper is change in pattern of female crime in Owerri, Nigeria. When dynamism is considered, trends and patterns of events are adequately accounted for. Nigeria has gone through many changes over time – political, economic and social. The country is currently experiencing economic downturn – poverty, high rate of unemployment, change in values, moral laxity and increased rate of crime and criminal activities.

Change in pattern of female crime in Owerri became apparent after independence and particularly during the civil war 1967-1970 when women were compelled to double their roles as mothers and breadwinners of their individual families as the men were out in the war fronts. The civil war gave way to the oil boom which facilitated corruption on a larger scale as there was increased desire for material possession by the people. Female criminality has since then assumed different forms and styles with the harsh political and economic conditions engendered by corruption and mismanagement of public funds in Nigeria. Women have gradually moved from misdemeanor to heinous crimes such as ritual killing, bribery and corruption and armed robbery. It is this observed change that the researcher tried to investigate. The main objective of this study is to identify the factors that led to the change in pattern of female criminality in Owerri. Other objectives include; to examine the socio-economic characteristics of female prisoners in the study area and to make recommendations based on research findings.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

A case study approach was adopted involving 135 women who had been incarcerated since 1980. Seventy three (73) of the inmates by 2000 were duly interviewed. Also 348 respondents for the assessment of the people's perception of female criminality in Owerri were interviewed. Primary and secondary sources were used for data collection. Data collected were subjected to statistical analysis using several statistical tables and analytical tools. These include descriptive statistics which use means and percentages for answering questions, while inferential statistics such as one way analysis of variance classification, Chi<sup>2</sup> test and t test were adopted in testing formulated hypothesis of the study at 5% level of significance. Also records pertaining to the prison inmates were made available to the researcher. The political economy theory was used since it gives a wider explanation of social phenomenon as it touches on the economy, polity and social issues.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Table 1 shows frequency distribution by types of crime committed by women prisoners in Owerri from 1980-2000. It is observed from the table that there is increasing rate of crime, particularly assault, stealing, armed robbery, fraud, child abandonment, with assault and stealing having the highest rate of increase. In 1980 three (3) female prisoners were involved in assault, while in 2000 they were twenty (20). Seven (7) female prisoners were jailed for stealing in 1980, while in 2000 there were nineteen (19) female prisoners with the same offence. Drug trafficking, ritual killing, child abandonment as well as armed robbery were observed to be new crimes amongst female prisoners within the study area.

Table 2 shows a frequency distribution of male-female prisoners 1980-2000. It was found that there was a significant increase of female crime despite the fact that there were more male prisoners over the years. The percentage increase is highest for female than for males.

Table 3 shows that a majority of the prisoners, 77.5 % ( 105) were young and 60% (81) were single. 40.5% (55) fall within the age bracket of 18-25 years which is the most restless segment of the society. This agrees with the findings for Great Britain, United States of America, Canada and other industrialized countries that prisoners are disproportionately young (Box, 1987). Young people are usually very active and most times fall under the unemployed and are likely to take to crime. Deprived of any meaningful source of livelihoods and exposed to the rigors of life in a capitalist economy, they find it difficult to make ends meet.

About 60% of the female prisoners were single. Most of them were in the category were heads of households of one parent family. Most female heads of households have a lot of pressure maintaining the households and feeding the children, particularly the *de jure* units i.e. those managed by women as a result of widowhood, desertion, divorce or decision to remain single. Box (ibid: 29) explains that social and economic conditions contribute to crime because they constrain, limit or narrow choice available.

Table 1: Distribution of female crimes in Owerri 1980-2000 (Source Nigerian prisons Owerri 2000

	1980	1990	2000	Total	%
Child Abandonment	0	2	6	8	5.9
Assault	3	12	20	35	25.9
Stealing	7	14	19	40	29.7
Armed Robbery	2	3	7	12	8.9
Murder	1	15	11	27	20
Drug Trafficking	0	0	3	3	2.2
Ritual Killing	0	0	3	3	2.2
Fraud	1	2	4	7	5.5
Total	14	48	73	135	100

Table 2: Frequency distribution in male-female prisoners in Owerri from 1980-2000

YEAR	MALE	FEMALE
2000	338(42%)	73(54%)
1990	250(31%)	48(36%)
1980	223(27%)	14(10%)
Total	811(100%)	135(100%)

Table 3: Age and Marital status of female prisoners in Owerri, Nigeria 1980-2000

Age	Single	Married	Divorced	Separated	Widowed	Total	%
18-25yrs	55	0	0	0	0	55	40.5
26-35yrs	20	22	6	2	0	50	37
36-45yrs	6	11	0	9	2	28	21
over-45yrs	0	0	2	0	0	2	1.5
Total	81	33	8	11	2	135	-
%	60	24.5	6	8	1.5	-	100

**Prisoners' reasons for crime commission:** The questionnaire was also intended to find out why the prisoners committed their different crimes.

Table 4 shows that out of 73 female prisoners interviewed 46.6% gave their reason for crime commission as provocation. Most of the prisoners in this category were involved in cases of assault. 30.1% gave their reason as economic while 23.3% were cases of conspiracy; either for armed robbery, drug trafficking, ritual killing and fraud. Majority of those in the category of conspiracy said that the ulterior motive for their crime commission was economic but they were imprisoned for conspiracy.

**Residence of female prisoners:** Residence was also used as a variable to determine the impact of environment on the change in pattern of crime. Seventy three (73%) of the prisoners indicated that they resided in Owerri urban while (27%) resided in the sub-urban or rural areas at the time of incarceration. Table 5 shows the percentage of prisoners by residence with Owerri as an urban area having the greatest number of female prisoners.

It had been proved by many researchers that more crimes are committed in the urban than in the rural areas (Oniboku 1973; Ferdinand 1970; Boggs 1965). They argue that uncontrolled rural urban migration has brought with it shortage of housing and high unemployment rate. These pose very serious problems which include high incidence of crime of all types. Also Vanderschueren (1996) argues that in situations of wide-spread and severe inequality, the urban poor are undervalued and marginalized, and their daily living conditions heighten the potential for the emergence of conflict, crime or violence.

Alder (1975) writing about female criminality in America, explains that urbanization is an important variable to reckon with in relation to environmental influences. She stresses that as urbanization increases, traditional role for women decreases. With increased mobility she argues people lose stable and continuous personal relationships. As disintegration of family life grows (divorce rate increases); the importance of goal attainment is emphasized at the expense of the means to attain the goal. The disruption of social relationship produced by the movement from rural to urban areas result in a sharp increase in crime as the old institutions based on kinship become less effective as agencies of social control.

**Educational level of female prisoners:** Educational level of female prisoners was used to test against the severity of crime commission by women (Table 6). The

Table 4: Reasons for commission of crime

Provocation	46.6 % (34)
Economic	30.1 % (22)
Conspiracy	23.3 % (17)
Total	100% (73)

Table 5: Residence of female prisoners

Urban	73% (98)
Sub-urban/rural	27% (37)
Total	100% (135)

Table 6: Educational Level and Severity of Crime amongst Female Prisoners in Owerri Prison 1980-2000

	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Total
Assault	19	19	0	38
Stealing	22	0	15	37
Fraud	0	6	0	6
Child Abuse	6	6	0	12
Drug Trafficking	0	0	4	4
Armed Robbery	0	6	3	9
Murder	3	20	6	29
Total	50	57	28	135

Table 7: Weighting of crimes according to degree of severity.

Crime	Weighting
Murder	7
Armed Robbery	6
Drug Trafficking	5
Child Abuse	4
Fraud	3
Stealing	2
Assault	1

crimes were weighted according to the degree of severity (Table 7).

The analysis of variability in educational level and severity of crime amongst female prisoners was calculated using – Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). It shows that there is significant variability amongst the levels of educational attainment and types of severity of crime committed by female prisoners. More people in secondary educational level commit more severe crimes than in the primary. The analysis of variance shows that there is a significant variability in level of formal education attained and the severity of crime committed. Table 6 shows that those who attained secondary education committed such severe crimes as murder and armed robbery. Those who attained primary education were involved in stealing and assault while those at the tertiary level were more involved in crimes like stealing as related to white-collar crimes. The variability of these types of crimes by level of education was found to be significant at 5% level of probability.

**Peoples' perception of the caudes of change in pattern of female crime:** The people interviewed had different views about crime commission by women. Table 8 and 9 show peoples perception of types of crimes committed by

Table 8: People’s perception of crimes committed by women before and after the civil war Before the Civil War

Stealing	44%
Assault	22%
Prostitution	20%
Abortion	10%
Murder	4%

Table 9: After the Civil War

Armed Robbery	54%
Drug Trafficking	21%
Fraud	14%
Murder	7%
Do not know	4%

Table 10: Reasons for change in Criminal behaviour of women by Respondents

Reasons for Change	Number	Percentage
Economy	335	96%
Changes in Values	13	4%
Total	348	100%

women before and after the civil war. The respondents agreed that there has been a change in pattern.

They also observed that there have been new crimes committed by women since after the civil war. These include armed robbery, drug trafficking and fraud. When asked for the cause of change in pattern of female crime, 96% of respondents claim that the change is due to economic instability in Nigeria over the years, while 4% said it was due to change in values in the society (Table 10).

Those who indicated economic instability as a cause of change in pattern pointed to the frequent change in government which led to changes in economic and social policies such as the Structural Adjustment Programme of the 1980s. Those who indicated that the cause was due to change in values see “traditional values” and family as suffering from the declining economy. The inability of parents to properly fend and care for their children has led to an erosion of parental authority, which paves the way for delinquency and immorality. Further, increasing numbers of young girls are engaged in street hawking which exposes them to sexual exploitation as well as other crimes. This is evidenced by a reputed increase in teenage pregnancies (World Bank 1996).

### CONCLUSION

Studies show that half of the world is made up of women, yet for most part they do not have equal access to land, credit, technology, education, employment opportunities and political power. Further, evidence suggests that women have become increasingly exposed to poverty during the 1990s. The feminization of urban poverty manifests itself in a disproportionate number of women in informal employment (Naila, 2003) – mainly in the less profitable areas of the informal sector; and in casual jobs. A growing number of female-headed households are among those without any source of

income and/ or without access to a public safety net (e.g. healthcare and childcare) (UN Habitat 2004). The implications of this situation are more than that of simple inequity. In every society women play crucial roles, they have pervasive effect on the well-being of their families, communities and local eco-systems. Therefore inequalities that are detrimental to them, be it their physical and mental health, income earning ability, education and decision making power are detrimental to them as well as to society at large.

The study has shown that there is an observable change in the pattern of female criminality in Owerri. Most literature and researches on the subject have presented socio-economic conditions as well as societal and environmental influences on the behaviour of women such as urbanization, illiteracy and unemployment as reasons for the shift in pattern. The study argues that while all these reasons are contributory factors, they cannot adequately explain the shift in pattern of female crime. Our finding is that women’s traditional non-economic role of child-bearing and childcare has broadened to include economic occupations. The introduction of money economy into the system paved the way for women to seek employment outside the home. As more women get into economic occupations like the men, crime patterns will become clearer and look like men’s.

The existence of private property has further encouraged economic activities for women. Hence as the social roles of men and women are becoming alike, their criminal activities become less distinguishable from one another. With increasing variety of roles opening to women, their criminal behaviour is expected to increase.

The study found that women have shifted from crimes like stealing, infanticide and prostitution to armed robbery, drug trafficking, fraud and other heinous crimes. These crimes were predominantly men’s. The study recommends that women should be given equal opportunities to struggle, which implies equipping them appropriately in terms of education, skills acquisition, employment opportunities and healthcare to minimize their involvement in criminal activities. This process of nurturing the women will in turn nurture the nation.

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