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Gender and white-collar crime in Norway: An empirical study of media reports

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Abstract

Purpose: Recent work on gender and white-collar crime is extended through a case study examining gender differences in white-collar crime in Norway.

Methods: Based on a content analysis of reports in Norwegian newspapers and court documents regarding white-collar crime cases that were of enough importance and notoriety so as to garner attention from national media outlets, this study investigates whether high level white-collar crime in Norway is gender neutral or gender specific (i.e., mostly male) as it is in the United States.

Results: Even though gender inequality is much lower in Norway than the United States, the gender gap in Norwegian white-collar crime appears to be nearly identical to that observed in the United States. Out of 329 individuals identified in the newspaper reports only 22 (6.7%) were women.

Conclusions: Formal gender equality does not appear to lead to increased involvement of women in white-collar crime, thus providing little support for the emancipation hypothesis and suggesting that theories focused on gendered focal concerns and gendered access to criminal opportunities have greater utility as explanations of the gender gap in white-collar crime.

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Keywords: Gender; White-collar crime; Corporate crime; Gender equality; Norway

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1. Introduction

White-collar crime is a global problem of enormous dimensions. Fraud, market manipulations, and corruption can be found to varying degrees in every economy and society in the world. The fraudulent schemes and corporate corruption scandals of the past two decades have confirmed once again the continuing relevance of white-collar crime as a significant threat to the economic and social health of nations across the globe (Barak, 2012) as well as an important area of criminological investigation. For criminologists, the importance of white-collar crime lies in part in its seeming differences from other forms of crime along several dimensions. Among the most important of these dimensions are the socio-demographic backgrounds of the individuals who commit these types of offenses, in particular class, gender and race, as well as the link between white-collar crimes and legitimate occupational, organizational and economic activities (Benson and Simpson, 2014). In this article, we extend research on white-collar crime and one of the most important dimensions of social stratification – gender – by examining two competing explanations of the gender gap in white-collar crime. As the economic and occupational attainments of women continue to advance in modern societies, it becomes important to understand whether they are becoming more involved in white-collar crime as a result of their increasing access to more powerful occupational positions. Or, conversely, as women move into upper level management positions, will their presence lead to reductions in white-collar crime in organizations?

First, we examine one of the main explanations put forth to account for the nature and low rate of women's involvement in white-collar crime: gender segregation and inequality in society and the workplace. Gender segregation and inequality in the workplace, it has been argued, limit women's access to opportunities to commit white-collar crimes (Dodge, 2009; Benson and Simpson, 2014; Steffensmeier et al., 2013). Although there is a body of research (Zeitz, 1981; Daly, 1989; Brickey, 2006; Holtfreter, 2005; Steffensmeier et al., 2013) and commentary (Dodge, 2009; Benson and Simpson, 2014; Simpson et al., 2012) on gender and white-collar crime in the United States, few studies have examined women's involvement in white-collar crime in other countries (but see, Adams and Funk, 2012; Blickle et al., 2006). The lack of comparative analyses is unfortunate because countries vary significantly in the degree and manner of women's participation in economic activities in general and in corporate organizations in particular (Hausman et al., 2008). Thus, one might hypothesize that as gender equality increases, women's involvement in white-collar crime will become more like men's, especially if gender equality is reflected in improved economic standing and employment opportunities for women.

Historically, the idea that greater gender equality will lead to increased female involvement in crime has been called the “emancipation hypothesis.” This hypothesis was first put forth in the mid-1970s in early research on gender and crime (Simon, 1975; Adler, 1981). In regard to ordinary street crime, the hypothesis has for the most part not been confirmed (Steffensmeier et al., 1989; Steffensmeier and Streifel, 1992). Variation in women's involvement in street-level type crime, whether analyzed longitudinally within one country or cross-sectionally across samples of countries, appears to be more associated with economic marginalization, access to opportunities for consumer crimes, and the formalization of social control rather than gender equality (Steffensmeier et al., 1989; Steffensmeier and Streifel, 1992).

Although the emancipation hypothesis is wrong in regard to gender and involvement in street crime, there are theoretical reasons for thinking that it may be more applicable to women's involvement in white-collar crime. The major criminological perspectives assume that employment and economic stability tend to reduce rather enhance the likelihood of crime, because such

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