Female Gangs in the United States

Upon reading chapter 18, you will learn about the following issues:

1. Features of female gangs
2. Differences between female and male gangs
3. Concept of chivalry hypothesis and female gangs
4. Organizational structures of female gangs

Generally, female gangs form for the same reasons why male gangs form. Sociological, cultural, economic, and psychological variables or factors converge to account for the reasons why females join or form a gang. We can summarize or list some of them here at this juncture:

1. Disintegration of the family unit
2. Lack of role models and parental guidance
3. Subcultural traits, e.g., delinquencies, truancies, incorrigibility
4. Poor neighborhoods, dysfunctions, poor housing
5. School dropouts, lack of interest in school, pressure from peers
6. Urge to conform to anti-social behavior
7. Inability to resolve personal or group conflicts
8. Abuse, neglect, low self-esteem, mental illness, feeling of abandonment
9. Poverty, need for economic resources, push for quick money

In general, the same theories that we presented and discussed earlier will be operative here as well. In particular, you may find that economic deprivation, negative associations and influences, subcultural adaptations, and institutional failures (schools, family, housing, jobs) may impinge on the reasons why some females join or form a gang.

Female Gang Activities

These may include but not limited to the following activities:

1. Prostitution
2. Drug trafficking
3. Organized thefts
4. Credit card frauds
5. Occasional violence, including murder for hire
6. Serving as a branch of the male gangs (representing the male gangs)
7. Robberies and burglaries (typical of Asian gangs on the West coast)
8. Supportive roles for the male gangs

Similar racial and ethnic alliances pervade female gangs: that is, you have African American, White, Asian, and Hispanic female gangs. Again, ethnicity seems to be the defining feature. However in the large urban centers in the US, mostly LA, Chicago, Boston, Miami, New York, one finds a fluid female gang membership where there are several instances of inter-ethnic mixings.

The current state of research on female gangs generally shows the following:

1. Most female gang members come from homes that are functionally disorganized usually in single parent households characterized by father-absence
2. Several have suffered sexual victimization at the hands of siblings and other male authorities
3. Several drop out from school though recent evidence seems to suggest that others finish high school
4. A recent survey reported that several females gang members view themselves as “branches” of their male gang counterparts
5. Over 60 per cent of female gang members report using and abusing drugs at an early age
6. Most join for psychological as well as economic reasons
7. Several join for protection or to have access to drugs: these are not your hardcore members
8. Average age of female gang member is 20
9. Mainly a lower class act, according to some social scientists: that African American and Hispanic females dominate female gangs in the US.

Recent evidence suggests though that #9 above is misleading; that there are middle class female gangs that operate in the suburbs as well. Their activities may consist of dealing and using drugs, organized thefts (shoplifting), and credit card frauds. However, some scholars have noted that these gangs lack the same degree of lethality and sophistication characteristic of minority, inner city female gang groups in the country.
Other features of female gangs may include some or all of the following:

1. Existence of hard core and loose members: This is particularly the case of High School gang groups. (refer to your textbook to the concept of neutrons)
2. Initiation rites are organized very frequently for new recruits
3. May be organized as a familial institution to provide emotional support. Notion of quasi-familial networks become operative here as well. That females join gangs in search of the nurturing that the lacked at home growing up, the sense of belongingness
4. Communicative symbols, garb, dressing, etc may mirror that of the male branch but sometimes are independent of the male counterparts
5. Use as mules, coyotes to sell and distribute drugs

Strong perceptions in the literature that female gang members are treated leniently by the justice system. Evidence on this is mixed. However studies show that for females who commit violent crimes, the rate and severity of punishment compares favorably with male violent offenders. The same cannot be said for petty, non violent, mainly property based crimes. Take a look at the works of Rita Simon, Freda Adler, Daryl Steffensmeier, Chesney-Lind, and Roy Austin on this subject.