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Media portrayals of female murder offenders

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It becomes transparent that the reason why the media and public are so fascinated by serial killers is that these people kill at will, requiring no legislation, without asking for or needing permission, the very concept never entering their mind

The media's vested interest is to deliberately inflate, out of greed to sell newspapers and boost TV ratings, an immense and often dangerous public hysteria and panic regarding the serial killer¹.

Previous estimates of serial killing have fuelled inaccurate media perceptions due to varying estimates by criminological researchers. For example, Holmes and DeBurger² estimated 3000-5000 victims by serial murder each year, which translates into 144 murders per serial murderer each year. O'Reilly-Fleming³ claims it is more likely that there are ten or less serial murderers operating per year, which would result in approximately 100 victims. Rowlands⁴ reports that there were only 30 multiple [serial] murderers active in the United States during a 14-year period (1970-1984).

Regardless of the total number of serial murderers who murder each year, one is enough to generate an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. The application of news values changes depending on the given social and historical time period. For example, Schlesinger and Tumber⁵ suggest that murder has perhaps lost some significance in today's society with respect to reporting in the news, although concerns remain, particularly for violence which is perceived to be gruesome. Naylor⁶ indicates that news values themselves are culture-specific, while reporting of

violence may also be regarded as a social marker that mirrors society's attitudes and values regarding gender.^{7,8}

Furthermore, multiple narratives may be working within reports of women's violence. For example, violence committed by women challenges dominant ideas of gender; it may be alternately constructed as frightening (for example, domestic killing and revenge behaviour, challenging patriarchal society) or trivialising (that is, unthreatening or amusing), conveying the message that women are not capable of masculine violence.⁹ In comparison, while violence committed by men is also censured, it is also understood to be an aspect of masculinity^{10,11}. Women who assume stereotypically masculine characteristics, such as aggression or strength, may be perceived as abnormal in comparison to women with more feminine attributes and regarded with suspicion. The news media utilise these narratives in their reporting of violent female offenders and therefore play a role in shaping news and reality for the public.

Imagery and Themes used by the Media

Images of women in society impact the ways in which female offenders and victims are viewed. Rafter and Stanko¹² identified six images of women that influence how they are perceived in both society and the criminal justice system: 1) the 'pawn of biology' in which women are viewed as 'gripped by biological forces beyond [their] control'; 2) 'impulsive and nonanalytical' in which women seemingly act intuitively and illogically; 3) 'passive and weak' in which women are seen as easy prey for victimisation or compliant accomplices; 4) 'impressionable and in need of

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1. Brady, I. (2001). *The Gates of Janus: Serial Killing and its Analysis*. Feral House p.84 & 73.
 2. Holmes, R.M. and DeBurger, J.E. (1988). *Serial Murder*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
 3. O'Reilly-Fleming, T. (ed.). (1996). *Serial and Mass Murder: Theory, Research and Policy*. Toronto: Canadian. Scholars' Press Inc.
 4. Rowlands, M. (1990). Multiple Murder: A Review of the International Literature. *Journal of the College of Prison Medicine*. 1:3-7.
 5. Schlesinger, P. and Tumber, H. (1994). *Reporting Crime: The Media Politics of Criminal Justice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
 6. Naylor, B. (2001). Reporting violence in the British print media: gendered stories. *The Howard Journal*, 40(2): 180-194 and Naylor, B.G. (2002). *Representing Violent Women: Gender and Crime Reporting in the British Print Media*. Cambridge University.
 7. See also Schlesinger and Tumber. (1994) see n.5.
 8. Skidmore, P. (1995). Telling tales: media power, ideology and the reporting of child sexual abuse in Britain. In Kidd-Hewitt, D. and Osborne, R. (eds.), *Crime and the Media: The Post-Modern Spectacle*. London: Pluto Press.
 9. Naylor (2002) see n.6.
 10. Messerschmidt, J. (1993). *Masculinities and Crime: Critique and Reconceptualization of Theory*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
 11. Wykes, M. (1995). Passion, marriage and murder: analysing the press discourse. In, Dobash, R., Emerson, R., Dobash, R.P. and Noaks, L. (eds.), *Gender and Crime*, p. 49. Cardiff, University of Wales.
 12. Rafter, H.N. and Stanko, A.E. (1982). *Judge, Lawyer, Victim, Thief: Women, Gender Roles, and Criminal Justice*. Boston: Northeastern University Press p.3.

protection' in which women are viewed as 'gullible and easily led astray'; 5) 'active woman as masculine' in which women who break from stereotypical passive roles as deviant and likely to be criminal and also likely to be viewed as lesbian; and 6) 'purely evil' suggests that it is worse for women to be criminal than for men because women are breaking out of both law-abiding boundaries and stereotypical gender role boundaries.

Criminological theories may reinforce stereotypes of women, which might affect how they are viewed in society and by the criminal justice system. For example, Butcher et al.¹³ contend that the media image of women is fragmented: 'no woman is just a sex object, mother, housewife, whore, she manages to unify these contradictory images of herself. She is on the surface a woman; underneath, those parts'. However, women who commit murder tend to be labelled even more broadly as 'evil' (deliberately intended to cause harm) or 'good' (did not deliberately intend to cause harm). The images of female offenders that have been identified from this media analysis incorporate Rafter and Stanko's¹⁴ images along with themes developed from offender and media categorisations¹⁵.

The Evil Woman

*If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?*¹⁶

History reveals that conceptions of evil may be gendered. For example, Krafft-Ebing¹⁷ contends that

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serial murder is a male phenomenon: 'such monstrous acts ... are much more frequent [in men] than [in] women'. Zimbardo¹⁸ suggests that dispositional causes (i.e., inherent personal qualities that lead to the action, such as genetic makeup, personality traits, character, free will, and other dispositions) are frequently sought as an explanation for evil. Zimbardo¹⁹ further argues that the *Malleus Maleficarum* (i.e., 'The Witches Hammer')²⁰ used during the time of the Inquisition, was one of the first documented sources of the 'widespread use of the dispositional view to understand evil and rid the world of its pernicious influence'. It was believed

that despite God's restriction of the Devil's direct influence over humans, who had earlier corrupted Adam and Eve, he was still able to use intermediaries (i.e., witches) as an indirect link to corrupt people²¹. Therefore, targeting 'witches' as the dispositional category seemingly created the solution to societal evil by 'destroying as many agents of evil as could be identified, tortured, and boiled in oil or burned at the stake'²² Klaitz²³ claims:

The witch craze often has been described as one of the most terrible instances of man's inhumanity to man.

But more accurate is the formulation of gender, not genus: witch trials exemplify men's inhumanity to women. The sexually powerful and menacing witch figure was nearly always portrayed as female.

It was more likely for women to be labelled as witches, given that men ran the Church and its State alliance²⁴ Elite members of society, acting with church reformers in a bid to consolidate their economic power and control targeted women, dissenters or the poor.²⁵

13. Butcher, H., Coward, R., Evaristi, M., Garber, G., Harrison, R., and Winship, J. (1981). Images of women in the media. In, Gray, A., Campbell, J., Erickson, M., Hanson, S., and Wood, H. (eds.), *CCCS Selected Working Papers*. London: Routledge p.319.

14. Rafter, H.N. and Stanko, A.E. (1982) see n.12.

15. For a further discussion of these issues see Gurian, E.A. (*in review*). Discourses of female homicide offenders in the media. *Journalism*.

16. Solzhenitsyn, A.I. (1974). *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956 : an Experiment in Literary Investigation, I-II*, translated from the Russian by Thomas P. Whitney. London : Collins : Harvill Press p.168.

17. Krafft-Ebing, R. von. (1886). *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Philadelphia, PA: F.A. Davis p.59.

18. Zimbardo, P. (2007). *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*. London: Rider p.7.

19. *Ibid* p.8-9.

20. Kramer, H. and Sprenger, J. (1486/1948). *The Malleus Maleficarum of Kramer and Sprenger ("The Witches Hammer")*, edited and translated by Rev. Montague Summers. New York: Dover.

21. Zimbardo (2007) see n.18.

22. *Ibid* p.9.

23. Klaitz, J. (1985). *Servants of Satan: the age of the witch hunts*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press p.152.

24. Zimbardo (2007) see n.18.

25. Noddings, N. (1989). *Women and Evil*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Female murder offenders may occasionally be referred to as 'evil' or 'wicked'. However, Waller²⁶ contends that 'despite its universality in human affairs, 'evil' is not a frequently studied construct with a generally accepted definition'. Yet a range of definitions for evil exists. Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth century English philosopher, wrote 'No man calleth good or evil but that which is so in his own eyes'.²⁷ Susan Sontag also argued that while 'we have a sense of evil', we no longer have 'the religious or philosophical language to talk intelligently about evil'²⁸ For Durkheim, evil is theorized as 'the absence of the good instead of the presence of something unto itself'.²⁹ Others have theorised that evil may occur through an individual's basic struggle for survival^{30,31} Evil may also be simply defined as the intentional harming of others³² Furthermore, Greig³³ notes how a seeming lack of motivation (for example, in murder cases) can result to the ascription of evil to explain the 'dysjunction between the very ordinariness of the context and the sudden explosion of violence ... [an] almost mystical element'. This logic may be employed in order to deny that 'normal' people have the capacity to commit crimes of extreme violence.

Comments made by court players noted in media reports tend to highlight the *evilness* and *otherness* of the offender. For example, the prosecution in the Aileen Wuornos case argued that she was a 'remorseless, diabolical killer'.³⁴ In the Susan Basso et al. case, defence attorney Loretta Johnson Muldrow asked jurors

to 'remember that a 'beast' gave birth to [James O'Malley]'³⁵ Federal prosecutors told jurors that 'Lisa Montgomery violated an expectant mother in the 'most wicked way possible'.³⁶

The 'Invisible Woman'

Studies on offending generally use male samples, despite gender being the strongest factor for indicating an individual's likelihood to break the law; 'sex, the most powerful variable regarding crime has been virtually ignored'.³⁷ Belknap (2002) explored women and girls in the criminal justice system and in criminology, describing them for the most part as 'invisible'. Likewise, studies on women in the media reveal that they may also be subject to 'symbolic annihilation', in which women may be treated with 'condemnation, trivialization, or absence' compared to men in the news.³⁸

Feinman's³⁹ research on the dichotomisation of women 'madonnas' or 'whores' contends that 'madonnas' produce children and are sweet and passive, while 'whores' fail to follow the prescribed societal role defined by the madonna category. However, Young⁴⁰ argues that where the madonna/whore dichotomy suggests a division of good girl/bad girl, categories of colour do not include the 'good girl'. Welldon⁴¹ trichotomises women's lives into 'madonna's', 'whores' and 'mothers', contending that women are made victims or sexual objects or removed

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26. Waller, J.E. (2007). *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press p.11.
27. Quoted in *The Leviathan* (1660), chapter 46.
28. Sontag, S. (1978). *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux p.85.
29. Cushman, T. (2001). The Reflexivity of Evil: Modernity and Moral Transgression in the War in Bosnia. In, J.L. Geddes (ed.), *Evil after Postmodernism: Histories, Narratives, Ethics*. London: Routledge p.80 emphasis in original.
30. Alford, C.F. (1997). *What Evil Means to Us*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press p.101.
31. Becker, E. (1975). *Escape from Evil*. New York: The Free Press p.13.
32. Zimbardo (2007) see n.18 p.5.
33. Greig, D. (1996). Criminal responsibility and the concept of evil. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 3(2): 163-178 p.167.
34. Lavin, C. (1992). Jury urges death for Wuornos. *St. Petersburg Times*, 31 January, p. 1A.
35. Brewer, S. (1999e). Jury deliberates fate of first defendant; five others await trial in beating death of mentally impaired man. *The Houston Chronicle*, 21 April, p. 25.
36. Anon. (2007). Cutting baby from womb was 'worst crime,' prosecutor says. Arguments proceed over death penalty in the killing of Bobbie Jo Stinnett. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 26 October, p. C10.
37. Leonard, E. B. (1982). *Women crime & society*. London: Longman p. xi.
38. Tuchman, G. (1981). Myth and the consciousness industry: a new look at the effects of the mass media. In Katz, E. and Szecsko, T. (eds.), *Mass Media and Social Change*, pp. 83 — 100. London: Sage p.169.
39. Feinman, C. (1986). *Women in the Criminal Justice System*. Praeger Publishers.
40. Young, V.D. (1986). Gender expectations and their impact on black female offenders and victims. *Justice Quarterly*, 3(3): 305-327.
41. Welldon, E.V. (1988). *Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood*. New York: Other Press p.86.

of their power by their male counterparts. These theories may account for limited reporting on offenders who were prostitutes and more extensive coverage on victims who were mothers.

Female homicide offenders tended to be *first* described as a wife, mother, or woman in the headlines or initial lines of text *before* their names were mentioned. The *Houston Chronicle*⁴² began a news story on Kenisha Berry: 'A woman believed to be the mother of a newborn girl found abandoned ...'. These female offenders were also described through their victims or occupations (e.g., nurse, landlady or prostitute). For example, the *St. Louis-Post Dispatch*⁴³ headlined a news story on Lisa Montgomery: 'Pregnant woman's killer found guilty'.

Female Biology / The Maternal Woman

In this narrative, female offenders may be represented as simply having no control; their actions are innate. Criminologist Pollak⁴⁴ contends that women are 'a population group which is characterized by psychologically disturbing biological crises'. Furthermore, female biology (for example, menstruation) may produce (via social preconception) psychological disturbances in women that could be associated with homicide, theft, arson, and resistance against public officials.⁴⁵ Naylor⁴⁶ explains, 'the woman is thus 'feminine' and can [be] understood within socially acceptable terms and (usually) excused'. Jewkes⁴⁷ argues:

Treating women who commit infanticide of filicide as hormonally disturbed perpetuates the 'myth of motherhood'⁴⁸ and suggest that 'normal' women are naturally maternal and find motherhood constantly fulfilling and joyful. While this is a dominant construction in

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mediated discourses, especially advertising, it is an image that is at odds with the stark reality that for many women motherhood can be anything but, for a variety of structural reasons (poverty, lack of support and so on) as well as physiological and psychological ones.⁴⁹

Therefore, female offenders who kill or injure their children may be framed within discourses of post-natal depression or depression in general.

Society's glorification of motherhood may serve to conceal the perverse or damaging maternal attitudes of some women towards their children⁵⁰ Rascovsky and

Rascovsky⁵¹ in their classical study on filicide drew attention to the injuries of infants caused by parents. These authors stated that the neglect of research in this area (particularly in psychoanalytical literature), could be regarded as 'an aspect of the universal resistance to acknowledging the mother's filicide drives, undoubtedly the most dreaded and uncanny truth for us to face'.⁵² Women's role as carers and mothers challenges

society to accept that women can also harm children.⁵³

The *LA Times*⁵⁴ reported that Cynthia Coffman 'graduated high school pregnant and was a mother at 18. After little more than a year ... [her] marriage unraveled'. Christene Kemmerlin also reportedly gave up a child for adoption at age 13, had an abortion at age 15, and got married and had a daughter at 17, but then divorced within two years.

The Sexual Deviant / The Lesbian / Othering

Issues of sexuality and gender are themes that ran throughout the reporting of the news stories on female murderers. Ngaire Naffine⁵⁵ states that 'crime is symbolically masculine and masculinity supplies the motive for a good deal of crime'. Women's violence as

42. Anon. (2003). Woman thought to be infant's mom arraigned. *The Houston Chronicle*, 14 June, p. 32.

43. Anon. (2007). Pregnant woman's killer found guilty. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 23 October, p. B8.

44. Pollak, O. (1950). *The Criminality of women*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press p.147.

45. Ibid p.158.

46. Naylor (2002) p.258 see n.6.

47. Jewkes, Y. (2004). *Media & Crime*. London: Sage Publications Ltd p.127.

48. Oakley, A. (1986) Feminism, motherhood and medicine — Who cares? In: Mitchell J, Oakley A (eds.), *What is Feminism?* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, pp.127-150.

49. Wilczynski, A. (1997). Mad or bad? Child-killers, gender and the courts. *Brit J Criminol.* 37(3): 419-436.

50. Welldon (1988) see n.41.

51. Rascovsky, A. and Rascovsky, M. (1968) 'On the Genesis of Acting Out and Psychopathic Behavior in Sophocles' Oedipus', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 49(2): 390-395.

52. Ibid p.390.

53. Jewkes (2004) see n.47.

54. Lait, M. (1992a). Second death penalty seen as costly effort. *Los Angeles Times*, 5 April, p. 1.

55. Naffine, N. (1987). *Female Crime: The Construction of Women in Criminology*. Boston: Allen and Unwin. p.43.

reported in the media therefore involves fundamental issues in regard to gender; 'The construction of the violent woman as masculine/non-feminine occurs in a context of masculinity (including men's violence) as active and rational, in contrast to the 'excessive' behaviour of the feminine', which is seemingly viewed as passive and irrational.⁵⁶ Another narrative regarding gendered behaviour is when women fail to conform to the feminine ideal, for example behaving in an aggressive or non-maternal fashion. However, women may also actively choose to rebuke the feminine ideal. This may be exemplified through cases such as Aileen Wuornos. For example, the *St. Petersburg Times* reported that Wuornos was a lesbian and she described herself as the 'white slave' of her 'needy female lover' (Tyria Moore).⁵⁷

Suggesting improper sexuality is a recognised means of 'othering'.⁵⁸ The 'bad' woman was a non-woman, a Lady Macbeth, a witch, or a whore.^{59,60} Sexuality was central to these images, where the madonna/whore dichotomy was utilised more generally in representation of the female.⁶¹

The Black Widow

Women who murder are visible as women, while men who murder are viewed simply as killers. Women also generally receive gendered labels for their murders, such as 'the black widow'. Boyle⁶² contends that labels draw attention 'both to the criminal act and the gender transgression'. However, men do not receive equivalent labels 'because their actions are not gender-transgressive but normative'.⁶³ Women's violence may therefore threaten to uncover the constructed nature of gender.⁶⁴ 'Black widow' was not a label used specifically within recent media reports, which is perhaps an indication that this gendered label has become outdated.

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The nickname 'black widow' recalls the poisonous spider that kills its mate when it is no longer useful. Indeed, female serial killers in general tend to use poison to kill their victims, who are usually intimates or family members.⁶⁵ 'Black widows' kill for profit, claiming the insurance policies, pensions or other inheritances from their victims. Previously, poison was arguably a useful means in dispatching multiple victims in that it was more difficult to link deaths and also relied on the death looking 'natural'; however, with the advent of scientific techniques for analysing tissue samples, some profit killers have also evolved their methods. For example, a number of female murder offenders have used guns to dispatch their victim(s) and then disposed of the body in more creative ways, such as burying the bodies.

A number of offenders within this sub-sample committed crimes for profit. For example, The *New York Times*⁶⁶ focussed on the nature of the Kimes' relationship: 'Interviews and a review of court records revealed a story of a tyrannical mother and a malleable son caught in a bizarre relationship, living a life of scams and aliases'.

The 'Angel of Death'

A commonly used phrase in describing nurses who murder their patients is 'angel of death'. According to Sautman,⁶⁷ folk tales frequently feature the theme of women's conflicting dual role as birth and death giver. Although nurses may be referred to as 'angels' in popular discourses, the phrase 'angel of death' (bringer of death) contradicts the associations with the word 'angel' (i.e., bringer of life or healing).

An underlying theme to the 'angel' narrative was one of the nurse employing medical means to murder, using her clinical knowledge to kill instead of heal, which according to Naylor⁶⁸ draws 'on narratives about

56. Naylor (2002) see n.6 p.253.

57. Lavin (1992) see n.34.

58. Naylor (2002) see n.6.

59. Heidensohn, F. (1985). *Women and Crime*. London: Macmillan.

60. Fox, M. (1996). Crime and punishment: representations of female killers in law and literature. In, Morison, J. and Bell, C. (eds.), *Tall Stories? Reading Law and Literature*. Aldershot: Dartmouth.

61. Macdonald, M. (1995). *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media*. London: Edward Arnold.

62. Boyle, K. (2005). *Media and Violence*. London: Sage p.95.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

65. Gurian, E.A. (in press). Female Serial Murderers: Directions for Future Research on a Hidden Population. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*.

66. Barnes, J.E. (2000d). Defense lawyers in murder of socialite attack investigation and caretaker. *The New York Times*, 19 February, p. 5.

67. Sautman, F. (1986). Woman as Birth-and-Death-Giver in Folk Tradition: a Cross-cultural Perspective. *Women's Studies*, 12: 213-239.

68. Naylor (2002) p.225.

women/witch doctors, and woman as witch' along with historical and symbolic ideas regarding women who kill by poisoning.^{69,70} As Sparks⁷¹ points out, the term 'nurse' (along with 'nanny' and 'secretary') is an 'unmarked' form of noun in gender terms; it is automatically seen as feminine (as distinct from, for instance, judge, criminal (and doctor), which, in their unmarked cases will automatically take the masculine pronoun.⁷²

Nurse Vickie Dawn Jackson's behaviour was explained: '... the modern-day hospital leaves all these medications at the fingertips of anyone who wants to play God with a patient. They need to be more careful with them, but the current hospital environment creates an opportunity for psychopaths'.⁷³ Michael R. Graham, chief executive officer of Nocona Hospital, was also quoted, 'When you have an alleged serial killer working in your hospital, it doesn't matter what policies and procedures you have in place. That person is going to do what they're going to do'.⁷⁴

The Mentally Ill Woman

*The suspicion is most often expressed today by the thought that people who commit appalling acts must necessarily be mad, that is, ill. And although the whole notion of mental illness has come under attack for other reasons, people still tend to regard it as the only possible humane response to this particular problem.*⁷⁵

Attributing mental illness to women who commit violence is a conventional 'pathologising' approach⁷⁶ Naylor⁷⁷ argues that 'Mental illness can connote the

'female' ... and also lack of responsibility or agency'. 'Madness' seemingly leads to sympathetic or 'chivalrous' treatment, and is constructed by narratives such as mental disorder^{78,79} the madness of love, or the fool for love^{80,81} However, women who acted out of 'jealousy' or anger are generally *not* recipients of chivalrous treatment. Female murder offenders may often be characterised as having some form of mental illness, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or depression.

Defence lawyers contended that their clients suffered from a range of mental disorders, including: borderline personality disorder, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Defence attorney Frederick Duchardt Jr. contended that Lisa Montgomery 'had a condition called pseudocyesis, in which a woman falsely believes she is pregnant and can exhibit some of the outward signs of pregnancy'⁸² Prosecutors generally countered by arguing that the defendant was faking mental illness to aid her defence and had acted rationally when she committed the crime(s).

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Discussion

This article examines how the portrayal of female homicide offenders by the media perpetuates gendered stereotypes regarding acts of murder. Female offenders are commonly portrayed as antithetical to their 'natural role' (i.e., mothers, caregivers) in order to emphasise their deviant and abnormal behaviour. Media stories on these offenders tend to focus on the narratives which render these women invisible or 'other'.

Constructions of the serial killer as a *masculine* entity may impede news stories of the female offender. For example, 'both crime statistics and crime news

69. Pollack (1950) see n.44.

70. Jones, A. (1981). *Women Who Kill*. New York: Fawcett Columbine.

71. Sparks, R. (1996). Masculinity and heroism in the Hollywood 'blockbuster': the culture industry and contemporary images of crime and law enforcement. *British Journal of Criminology*, 36(3): 348-360. p.348.

72. This may also occur in the term 'serial killer', which may automatically be seen as masculine and may account for why women were less likely to be included in media reports.

73. Moore, E. (2001). 20 deaths in hospital investigated; exhumations may prove homicide. *The Houston Chronicle*, 29 April, p. 1.

74. Anon. (2002a). Ex-nurse indicted in hospital deaths. *The Houston Chronicle*, 17 July, p. 21.

75. Midgley, M. (1986). *Wickedness: A Philosophical Essay*. Great Britain: Cox & Wyman, Limited, Reading.

76. Allen, H. (1987). *Justice Unbalanced: Gender, Psychiatry and Judicial Decisions*. Milton Keynes, England: Open University Press.

77. Naylor (2002) see n.6 p.233.

78. Heidensohn (1985).see n.59.

79. Wilczynski (1997) see n.49.

80. Naylor, B. (1995). Women's crime and media coverage: Making explanations. *Gender and Crime*, R.E. Dobash, R.P. Dobash and L. Noaks. Cardiff: University of Wales.

81. Fox (1996) see n.60.

82. Anon. (2007). Slain woman stood up for alleged killer. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 7 October, p. C6.

portray offending as predominately a male activity'.⁸³ Indeed, it is possible that law enforcement professionals, researchers and the public may be 'more attracted to the media agenda than they are willing to recognise' and thus more 'comfortable' with the perception of serial murderers as 'evil men' who kill innocent strangers.⁸⁴ Woman who kill may be viewed by society as operating under the spectrum of good or evil actions, either as 'compassionate' or 'cold-blooded' killers depending on a number of factors (including the level of premeditation involved in the murder, characteristics of the victim (such as age and health), and characteristics of the offender (such as mental health and societal issues including sexuality and domesticity)).^{85,86}

Jewkes⁸⁷ suggests, 'The failure of the media to acknowledge the agency of women involved in serious offences is also apparent in terms of the delicacy with which the media side-step the actual details of their offences'. That is to say, crimes of rape, sexual abuse or extreme violence committed by women are rarely reported by the media in detail; readers may be aware that offenders such as Myra Hindley or Rose West were involved in sexual crimes along with multiple murders but the details remain ambiguous as does their

involvement. This sidestepping by news outlets is surprising 'given the appetite for sex that is often attributed to the popular presses and its readership'.⁸⁸ Morrissey claims, '[a]pparently, so these news stories say, men rape and murder, women watch and help with the clean up'.⁸⁹ Indeed, given that violent female offenders deviate from 'conventional hegemonic, heteropatriarchal conceptions of femininity'⁹⁰ it is possible that the media may simply be unable to report on women who participate in extreme violence or sex crimes.

The media perpetuate a number of sex role stereotypes in their construction of news reports on female murderers. It is not proposed that the media increase the visibility of female murderers in the news by suddenly publishing more stories; this could result in the illusion of a 'crime wave' of female murderers. The relationship between media reporting and treatment of women in the criminal justice system is complex, but news reporting could be improved and made more accurate by fact checking and considering word selection, omission, the use of the offender's name, and attention to issues such as gender. Using gender-neutral classifications and terminology in these news stories may limit stereotyping of sex roles by the media.

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83. Sacco, V.F. (1995). Media constructions of crime. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 539: 141-154. p.143.
84. Soothill, K. and Wilson, D. (2005). Theorising the puzzle that is Harold Shipman. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 16(4): 685-698. p.686.
85. Carlen, P. (1983). *Women's Imprisonment*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
86. Worrall, A. (1990). *Offending Women: Female Lawbreakers and the Criminal Justice System*. London: Routledge.
87. Jewkes (2004) see n.47.
88. Ibid p.131.
89. Morrissey, B. (2003). *When Women Kill: Questions of Agency and Subjectivity*. New York: Routledge. p.153.
90. Jewkes (2004) see n.47 p.131.