

# Women and Violence: Myths and Reality in the 21st Century

**Frances Heidensohn** examines some of the popular mythology surrounding women who commit acts of violence.

'Monster', 'Gorgon': women convicted of serious violent crime are often portrayed in the media in highly sensationalised ways. If they do not become like Myra Hindley, an iconic image of evil and depravity in modern art and culture, their sexuality and toughness may be emphasised as 'Tank Girls'.

Yet these are not typical female offenders: in 1997, of 1.7 million known offenders only 17 per cent were female. While the female prison population doubled in the 1990s, half of this increase was due to rising convictions for drug offences. Fewer women than men admit ever committing an offence and records show a much smaller percentage of women than men have a conviction over their lifetimes. The most common offences among women are theft and handling and drug offences, with violence against the person accounting for about ten per cent of the total.

In sum, as pioneer feminist criminologists first stressed decades ago, there remains a significant 'gender gap' in rates of offending, albeit one that has narrowed somewhat in the late twentieth century. Hence, too, one explanation for the exaggerated depiction of some violent women in the mass media: they are perceived as 'doubly deviant', breaking social norms for womankind as well as the criminal code.

This is because women's and girls' experiences of the criminal justice system are still presented and compared with men's. (The informative Home Office document from which most of the above figures are taken understandably presents all its data in relation to male benchmarks). Major improvements have been made in our understanding of many aspects of gendered and

racialised violence, and of interpersonal violence, its nature, scale and impact. What we still lack, but are gradually acquiring, are appropriate frameworks for looking at these issues and for addressing some of their policy consequences.

## 'Normal' and 'counting'

It is striking that we do not have notions of 'normal' uses of force and violence by women and girls. This contrasts markedly with the ways we deal with male behaviours such as rough play and fighting, and legitimate activities with rules of engagement such as contact sports or military action. We know that women have the capacity for violence. There is a small but significant historical record of females using violence for political ends. Charlotte Corday murdered Marat in his bath, women were key figures in the assassination of the Tsar in 1881 and in 20th century terrorist movements such as the Bader-Meinhof group. In Britain in the 1900s the Suffragettes employed direct action and damaged property to further the cause of votes for women.

Illegal use of violence for less exalted ends is not a new phenomenon either. Some historians have suggested that women's offending was higher in the 18th century and declined in the 19th century more notably than men's, as a result of improved welfare measures. Female multiple killers were not unknown in the past: Mary Ann Cotton, convicted and hanged in 1873, was believed to have murdered up to twenty victims.

Such cases remain very unusual; typical examples of female violence involve wounding, battering back to spousal abuse and injuries to children. Homicides are infrequent.

If sentences are taken as a mark of seriousness, we can note that only 25 per cent of those received into prison for these offences in 1998 were sentenced to more than 12 months. One of the more dramatic changes of the 20th century was the way in which female participation in law enforcement and the military has developed in many nations. In the USA, Britain and Australia women entered policing in the 1900s; while they may make up under 20 per cent of sworn officers, they are armed and trained to use force, expected to perform the same duties as their male colleagues. Deploying female soldiers in frontline units remains a contentious issue in military establishments, but they were involved in armed combat in Panama, the Gulf War and the Balkans. All these examples suggest that it is the low resort to violence

by women that should be the focus for research, posing the question of what its significance is in their lives. Several research projects have sought to answer this. American research has highlighted links between violence in some women's lives and their involvement in illegal activity, including abuse of themselves and others. This is especially true of women from ethnic and social minorities. One of the ESRC Violence Research programme studies, 'A View from the Girls', highlights a complex continuum of violence in the day to day lives of girls in Scotland. Findings include distinctive definitions of what counts as violence, with verbal abuse ranking as very harmful; the lack of neat fit into the categories of 'victim' or 'perpetrator'; and that girls in general learn to manage and to desist from violence.

These are two examples of work which supports the conclusions of the Prison Reform Trust's report *Justice for Women*. The Trust notes "a fundamental fault in the country's arrangements for dealing with female offenders" and recommends that a National Women's Justice Board, resembling the Youth Board, be established to commission and manage a distinctive range of services.

We know that women act violently, and that they experience violence from men and from each other. We also know that violence is a common thread in the lives of many women in ways not fully acknowledged nor addressed in the criminal justice system.

**Frances Heidensohn** is Professor of Social Policy, University of London, Goldsmiths College.

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