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.

‘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 physical and emotional abuse, and murder of family members. 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 in the UK, 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 front-line 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.

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 each other. We also know that violence is a common thread in the lives of many women in ways not fully acknowledged or addressed in the criminal justice system.