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# Girls and Violence: The Case for a Feminist Theory of Female Violence

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### Abstract

Rises recorded for girls' violence in countries like Australia, Canada, United Kingdom and United States have been hotly contested. One view is these rising rates of violence are an artefact of new forms of policy, policing, criminalisation and social control over young women. Another view is that young women may indeed have become more violent as they have increasingly participated in youth subcultural activities involving gangs and drugs, and cyber-cultural activities that incite and reward girls' violence. Any comprehensive explanation will need to address how a complex interplay of cultural, social, behavioural, and policy responses contribute to these rises. This article argues that there is no singular cause, explanation or theory that accounts for the rises in adolescent female violence, and that many of the simple explanations circulating in popular culture are driven by an anti-feminist ideology. By concentrating on females as victims of violence and very rarely as perpetrators, feminist criminology has for the most part ducked the thorny issue of female violence, leaving a discursive space for anti-feminist sentiment to reign. The article concludes by arguing the case for developing a feminist theory of female violence.

### Keywords

Female delinquency, feminist criminology, female violence, narrowing gender gap.

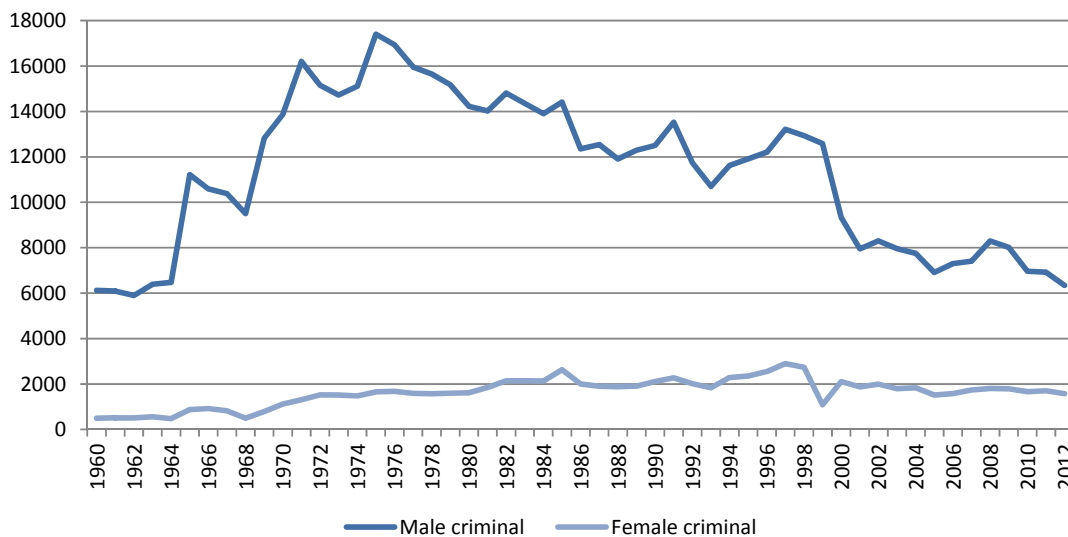
### Global rises in female violence

While males still dominate crime statistics as offenders and prisoners, a body of international and national trend data points to a consistent narrowing of the gender gap for officially reported crime and violence in countries like the United States (US), Canada, the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia. In the US, for instance, crime trend data from 2000 to 2009 show nearly an 18% increase in arrests of females under the age of 18 for assaults compared to just a 0.2% increase for similarly aged males (US Department of Justice 2010). During this time frame there were significantly higher increases in arrests of young females for drug abuse violations and driving under the influence compared to males. Arrests of females under the age of 18 for disorderly conduct increased by 8% while the arrests of males in this age group decreased by 8% over the same time frame.<sup>1</sup> The US Department of Justice Study Group on girls and violence compared the rising rates of girls' crime with victimisation and self-report data and also found

reported violence for girls was rising faster than for boys, although the extent varied according to which measure was used.

In England and Wales, a major study of juvenile female offending between 2000 and 2005 found that 'the number of young female offenders has risen by approximately 18% over the past five financial years', and that the number of violent offences for juvenile females more than doubled over the same period (Arnull and Eagle 2009: 40, 47).<sup>2</sup> In the three year period between 2003 and 2006 rates of violence recorded for girls in England increased 78% (Youth Justice Board 2004a, 2007 in Sharpe 2012: 33).

In Australia, while boys still outnumber girls under Australian juvenile justice supervision,<sup>3</sup> the gender gap is narrowing. Taking Australia's largest jurisdiction as an example, across a 52 year period of trend data (1960-2012), the ratio of young women to young men appearing before the NSW Children's Courts for criminal matters (finalised court appearances) narrowed from around one in fourteen (1:14) in 1960 to around one in four (1:4) in 2012 (see Figure 1). While changes in data definitions and counting rules over such a long time pose data quality issues, nevertheless the trend is so consistent it cannot be simply attributed to statistical artefact.

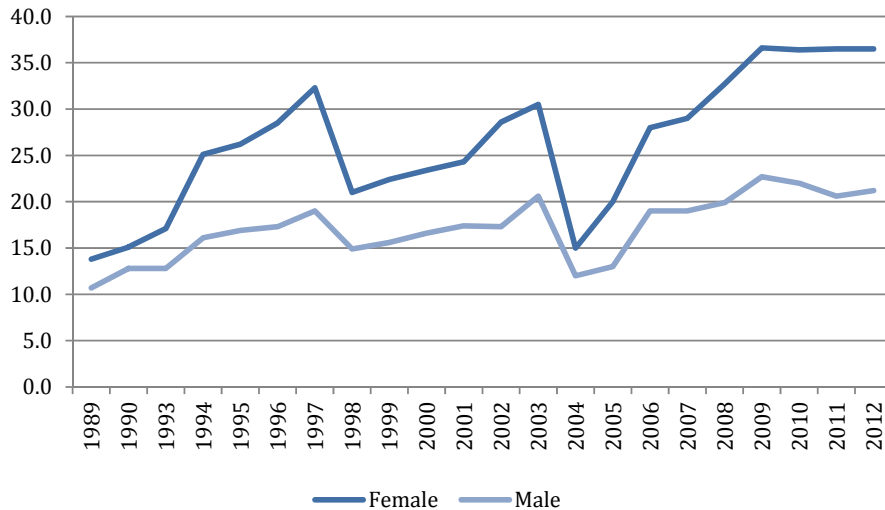


**Figure 1: Finalised Court Appearances Criminal Offences, by Sex, NSW Children's Courts 1960-2012**

Source: NSW Children's Court Data (1960-2012)<sup>4</sup>

Note: Data quality issues affect the trend data due to changes in counting rules that invariably occur over such a long time frame.

Crime data for girls' violence have also been rising over the last two decades. Acts intended to cause injury (violent offences) accounted for around 36.5% of all the matters for which young females appeared before the children's courts in NSW in 2012, compared to just 13.8% in 1989 (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 1989-2012: see Figure 2). Earlier data is not comparable due to changes in the definition and recording of violent offences. By comparison, over the same time frame, the proportion of violent related offences for which juvenile males appeared before the NSW Children's Courts rose less dramatically, from 10.7% in 1989 to 22.2% in 2012 (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 1989-2012: see Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Proportion (%) of violent offences by sex, 1989-2012, NSW Children's Court**

Source: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (1989-2012)

Note: Violent offences are defined as acts intended to cause injury, finalised court appearances most serious offence

Another 10-year study (1999-2010) for the same jurisdiction, undertaken by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, came to the same conclusion that violence was rising faster for girls than boys. This study, which uses administrative byproduct data based on reports to the police, found that the number of juvenile female offenders increased by 36%, compared to an 8% increase in male juvenile offenders over the same ten year time-frame (Holmes 2010: 6). Among the top ten offences for girls, shop-lifting was the highest, accounting for 21% of those offences which attracted police attention. The second highest ranking offence recorded by police was non-domestic violent assaults, accounting for 10.9% of juvenile female offenders compared to 7.1% of male juvenile offenders (Holmes 2010: 6).<sup>5</sup>

There is no doubt that officially recorded rates of violence for girls based on reports to the police have been increasing in countries like US, UK, Canada and Australia for some time. This trend appears to be triangulated by victimisation data that shows young women are assaulted predominantly by their friends or peers during early adolescence (House of Representatives Inquiry into Youth Violence 2010: 20-21, Table 2.2) and by qualitative studies of girls violence (Jones 2008; Miller 2004; Sharpe 2012: 89).<sup>6</sup>

However, there is little agreement as to why these rates are rising (Alder and Worrall 2004; Carrington 2006; Carrington and Pereira 2009; Chesney-Lind 1999; Reitsma-Street 2000). The debate is evident in two contrasting papers published in *Criminology*, one of the world's leading journals in this discipline. While official reports of crime indicate that the gender gap has narrowed over the last two decades, Steffensmeier and his colleagues (2005) argue that this is due largely to several net widening policy shifts that led to increases in the arrest of girls for behaviour that, in the past, was either not policed or overlooked. By comparison, their analysis shows that a similar trend is not evident in longitudinal self-report data. In contrast, Lauristen and colleagues (2009) argue that the narrowing of the gender gap is real. Their longitudinal analysis covering the period from 1973 to 2005 compares patterns in National Crime Victimization Survey data, based on self-reports, with those in the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) that are based on police arrest data. They conclude that 'female-to-male offending rate ratios for aggravated assault, robbery, and simple assault have increased over time and that the narrowing of the gender gaps is very similar to patterns in UCR arrest data' (Lauristen, Heimer and Lynch 2009: 361). While acknowledging that the narrowing of the gender gap – especially during the 1990s – was due largely to decreases in male offending rates rather than large

increases in female offending rates, they concluded that the issue is real and warrants 'serious attention in future research' (Lauristen, Heimer and Lynch 2009: 361).

A key issue in this debate is whether statistical increases in female offences are generated by less serious offences being brought into the system or changes in policy and policing that disproportionately impact upon girls (Acoca 2004; Alder and Worrall 2004; Arnull and Eagle 2009; Brown, Chesney-Lind and Stein 2007; Carrington 2006; Muncer et al. 2001; Sharpe 2012). Sceptics point out that the large percentage rises are partly the product of small numbers and partly an effect of decreasing numbers of boys coming to the attention of the police and courts. In sum, explanations for the rising rates of female violence remain contentious (Alder and Worrall 2004; Carrington and Pereira 2009; Sharpe 2012). Are these patterns the product of new forms of social control, changing methods of recording information, changes in styles of policing and policy, increases in girls' violence, or changes in attitudes to female offending? The following wrestles with these questions while attempting to critically assess the explanations typically offered to account for rises in girls' violence. The main focus is on explaining rises in female violence, as this has attracted the most critical public and scholarly attention.

### **Shifting modes of social control**

The argument which appears to have most currency among feminist and criminological scholars is that girls are not becoming more violent; rather, shifting modes of social control are having a net-widening effect on offences defined as violent (Alder and Worrall 2004; Chesney-Lind and Shelden 2004; Luke 2008; Sharpe 2012; Steffensmeier et al. 2005). Similarly, Alder and Worrall argue that definitions of girls' violence are culturally constructed, and statistical increases in female juvenile violence may be partly accounted for by girls' increased visibility in public spaces, a widening of behaviour deemed unacceptable and distorted analyses of statistical data (Alder and Worrall 2004: 10). This theory discursively repositions female violence in a context of less serious, social and relational aggression that occurs mostly in the context of girls peer networks (Alder and Worrall 2004; Chesney-Lind and Irwin 2008). The statistical rises in girl's violence are then attributed mostly to shifts in methods of policing. Referred to as 'up crimming', this mode of social control entails the criminalisation of less serious forms of girls' 'disorder', such as girls who occupy public space, who express their sexuality, who are boisterous or rebellious (Alder and Worrall 2004: 11). According to this explanation, girls' violence is generally thought to be less serious on the scale of aggression compared to boys but, importantly, there are lower thresholds for intervening when girls engage in aggressive conduct compared to boys (Alder and Worrall 2004; Beikoff 1999; Chesney-Lind 1999). Hence girls' violence creates a greater interventionist social reaction or, rather, over-reaction.

In a recent book on *Offending Girls*, Gilly Sharpe suggests that the obsession with the new 'violent female offender' has become the substitute for historical policy concerns with wayward girls and sexual delinquency (Sharpe 2012: 23). She argues that a raft of new more punitive policing and policy responses to youth crime in England has had a disproportionately criminalising impact on girls' behaviour, inflating the population of 'violent' female offenders (Sharpe 2012: 24). There is little doubt that the sexualisation of girls' deviance was central to historical constructions of and responses to female adolescent delinquency in the last half of the twentieth century (Carrington 1993, 2006; Chesney-Lind 1974; Gelsthorpe 1999; Gelsthorpe and Worrall 2009). However, since the removal of status offences which sexualised female delinquency, a tapestry of other factors has emerged which could be enhancing the prospects of female violence, such as the growth of girls' participation in drug economies,<sup>7</sup> the slight rise in their participation in body contact sports such as martial arts and football,<sup>8</sup> and their increasing involvement in street based youth subcultures more generally.<sup>9</sup>

The post war era during the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s witnessed an explosion in youth sub-cultures (Hall and Jefferson 1975). During this period, youth culture became a

metaphor for modernity, a symbol for trouble, a signifier for social change, chaos and disruption, and the loss of certainty (Hebdige 1979; Stratton 1992). Moral panics associated with post-war youth cultures diverted much adverse attention toward these youthful leisure activities (Cohen 1980; Poynting et al. 2004). This increased visibility brought increasing numbers of young people (mostly boys) into conflict with the law, usually for petty delinquencies that arose in the context of their participation in street-based youth subcultures (Hall and Jefferson 1975; Stratton 1992). Not surprisingly, this was the time when official rates of delinquency were peaking for boys in Australia and other parts of the globe.

During the 1960s and 1970s, girls were largely excluded from the central activities of most working class youth subcultures such as drug use, motor bike riding, football hooliganism, surfing, street-fighting, skateboarding or roller blading (Carrington 1993; McRobbie and Garber 1991). A growing body of social research, however, suggests that since the 1980s and into the twenty-first century, the qualitative participation of young women in gangs and youth subcultures has changed (Burman, Batchelor and Brown 2001; Campbell 1984; Maher 1997; Miller 2004; Mullins and Miller 2008). This body of international research based on empirical studies in Scotland, England, Australia and America illustrates that young women are now more likely to actively participate in the focal concerns of street-based youth sub-cultures vulnerable to criminalisation, youth gangs involved in selling and consuming drugs, grifting, thieving and petty crime, distinguishing them from their female adolescent counterparts of earlier decades who mostly hung out in the privacy of the bedroom with their girlfriends (McRobbie and Garber 1991). From the 1980s onwards, girls have increasingly been participating in the types of crime and violence that occurs in gangs and between gang members, and of being criminalised for that participation. This goes some way to explaining the rises in girls' crime and violence, particularly during the last two decades of the twentieth century.

There is also no doubt that the growth in girls' violence is to some extent an artefact of shifting modes of governance and policing – especially the shift from sexualising to criminalising girls' delinquencies over the last three decades (Carrington and Pereira 2009; Sharpe 2012). New forms of scrutiny, ways of recording and reporting crime data, and changes in attitudes to girls' offending account for some of the increases of violence recorded for young women. How much is unknown. However, the impact of shifting modes of governance occurred primarily with the removal of status of welfare offences in the 1980s and 1990s (Carrington 2006), not over the last twenty years' the period during which rises in officially recorded girls' violence have been most pronounced (see Figure 2). Over this period, two socio-cultural shifts have occurred that in theory could be impacting on rising rates of girls' violence. The first relates to shifting social expectations and cultural constructions which celebrate the violent femme and normalise 'ladette' culture. The second relates to the impact of new forms of social online net-working that normalise, reward and incite girls' fights. Again, how much is unknown and no causal links are asserted in this article but, theoretically, the links between these shifts and the upward trends in female violence warrant scrutiny.

### **Masculinised femininity: Ladette culture and the celebration of the violent femme**

Heightened anxiety about the behaviour of young women has shifted over the last few decades from sexual promiscuity to the 'violent, aggressive bad girl' (Brown and Tappan 2008: 48; Sharpe 2012: 4). Ladette behaviour is typically associated with working class masculinity such as acting tough, excessive smoking, swearing, fighting, drinking, being disruptive at school, being rude to teachers, and being open about sex (Jackson 2006). Ladette behaviour also tends to be represented in the popular media as 'girls moving into the world of violence that once belonged to boys' (Batchelor 2009; Brown Chesney-Lind and Stein 2007; Jones 2008; Muncer et al. 2001). Girls' apparent switch from feminine behaviour to a masculinised anti-social, confrontational style is often linked to new, aggressive cultural images of women portrayed in films and on television (Muncer et al. 2001; 35),<sup>10</sup> such as in movies like *Mean Girls* and the

reality TV show *Ladettes*. The new violent femme is also glorified in action films like *Lara Croft Tomb Raider*, its sequel and a vast array of associated video games. Images of these new violent femmes are highly eroticised, being simultaneously seductive and sadistic.

These representations of masculinised femininity depict girls' violence as a new and growing social problem often attributed to the legacy of feminism. For instance, Germaine Greer, described as 'the first ladette', was berated for the 'destruction of feminine modesty and decency' and condemned for producing 'an entire generation of loose-knickered lady louts' (Letts 2009). Big Brother, too, claims ladettes are a legacy of feminism (ThisisBigBrother.com n.d.). I return to the issue of blaming feminism for instances of female violence later.

Sceptics argue that, on the contrary, the new violent femme or ladette is not much more than a cultural and media construction (Brown, Chesney-Lind and Stein 2007; Brown and Tappan 2008; Muncer et al. 2001). It is not simply whether girls are really becoming more violent but also how girls' violence and aggression is culturally represented, mediated and performed; and how these constructions might then shape contemporary adolescent feminine identity and practice (Brown and Tappan 2008: 51). Brown and Tappan suggest that these shows redefine femininity, promoting a 'mean girl' image to adolescents to portray aggression as a desirable female character trait (Brown and Tappan 2008: 49). They argue that girls' appropriation of behaviour such as fighting, which has traditionally been reserved for boys, does not mean girls are becoming like boys. Rather, Brown and Tappan argue that girls' appropriation of aggression and violent behaviour permits girls to re-create feminine identities that simultaneously challenge and reproduce their subordinate position in relation to boys (Brown and Tappan 2008: 55-56).

There have been a few attempts to understand how violence features in the consciousness of young women and how it is utilised in their everyday lives (Burman, Batchelor and Brown 2001). A number of these studies have challenged normative gender assumptions of girls' aggression as relational, manipulative and covert, arguing that girls can also be physically aggressive and fight in violent ways (Artz 2004; Batchelor 2009; Boyer 2008; Jones 2008; Ness 2004). For example, Jones' study of violence among black inner-city girls and women, illustrated how violence is part of the code of the street that offers strategies for survival that cross perceived gender lines. In contrast to young men's violence which tends to be linked to displays of masculinity, girls' use of violence was not linked to any defining characteristics of being a woman but, rather, was a means to an end (Jones 2008: 78).

Yet girls' violence has traditionally been ignored or trivialised as 'just girls being bitchy' while boys' participation in indirect or relational aggression has remained largely unexamined (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz and Kaukiainen 1992; Spears et al. 2008; Tomada and Schneider 1997). This gendered polarisation of girls' relational aggression and boys' physical violence overlooks the participation of girls in fights for survival, power, pleasure, respect and status (Boyer 2008; Brown and Tappan 2008; Jones 2008), as well as the way girls are increasingly using the internet to broadcast their physical fights with other girls, an issue to which I now turn.

### **Girl's violence, cyberspace and on-line social net-working**

Young people growing up in the twenty-first century are the first generation to intermingle on-line communication with face-to-face social exchange to create a new kind of social interaction.<sup>11</sup> The implications of the intermingling of these parallel worlds are yet to be fully appreciated or understood. There is increasing evidence, however, that social on-line networking has created new possibilities as well as new risks for young women. Just as there has been a failure to grasp theoretically the profound impacts and harms of cyberspace on real worldly experiences of sexual victimisation (Powell and Henry 2013), equally there has been an oversight of the impact of on-line social networking on girls' real worldly experiences of

violence. This section attempts to wrestle with this issue. It does not attempt to draw a simplistic causal correlation between on-line social networking and rises in girls' violence – but nor does it dismiss the prospect.

One of the by-products of the massive uptake of social networking is that this technology has enabled the extension of bullying into cyberspace, beyond the school ground to penetrate the home and places of sanctuary (Patchin and Hinduja 2006: 155; Rigby and Griffith 2009; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria 2009). A Canadian study found around 60% of the victims of cyber bullying were girls and that female cyber bullying is often directed at other girls (Li 2005). An American study by Kowalski et al. (2008) found that girls were twice as likely as boys to be both the victims and the perpetrators of cyber bullying (Mason 2008: 327). This may be attributed to the fact that girls' up-take of on-line social networking is significantly higher than boys and girls are more likely to post personal information on-line than boys (Chang et al. 2008).

The posting of personal information can be misused to issue insults to reputation that inflame conflict between girls (Daly 2008; Jones 2008; Mullins and Miller, 2008). One way to interpret this is to argue that girls' on-line bullying is just another form of typically gendered relational aggression such as bitchiness, manipulation and exclusion (Bowie 2007; Brown, Chesney-Lind and Stein 2007; Simmons 2002; Williams and Guerra 2007). In the context of cyber violence, this may translate into sending threatening messages via text and email, online bullying via chat rooms, and manipulating and excluding others (Crick and Grotpeter 1995; Li 2005; Smith et al. 2008). All too easily these studies of girls and cyber bullying tend to slip into a gender binary that largely assumes girls are bitchy and manipulative, while it is mainly boys who are physical and aggressive. The use of the internet to inflame and reward girls' physical fighting in a parallel world is completely overshadowed by a focus on their participation in covert forms of cyber bullying such as threatening text messages, name calling and exclusion (Rivers and Noret 2009; Trach et al. 2010). Consequently, there is a scarcity of research on how social networking can fan conflict in the parallel real worlds of young women, and how girls might engage in internet, Facebook and YouTube sites to promote, incite and normalise girls' violence.

**Table 1: Google search results: Fight sites by sex**

<i>Search words</i>	<i>Girls (in millions)</i>		<i>Search words</i>	<i>Boys (in millions)</i>	
	<i>22 Sep 2009</i>	<i>20 Mar 2013</i>		<i>22 Sep 2009</i>	<i>20 Mar 2013</i>
Girls fighting tips	41.6	48.8	Boys fighting tips	0	31.7
Girls fighting at school	37.4	142.0	Boys fighting at school	8.9	90.3
Girls fighting YouTube.com	24.1	102.0	Boys fighting YouTube.com	3.0	36.9
Girls fight video	73.3	567.0	Boys fight video	31.5	267.0
Girl fighting girl	70.7	153.0	Boy fighting over girl	38.3	785.0

Source: Google search results accessed 22 September 2009 and 20 March 2103

While many girls use the internet in positive ways and to form friendships or promote solidarity, thousands of girls around the world use the internet to broadcast their physical fights with other girls. The data in Table 1 show consistently higher Google search results for girls' fights compared to boys' fights except for boys fighting over girls. The same Google search repeated in 2009 and 2003 illustrates that these sites are growing exponentially. The descriptive results of this exercise, while not making any claims to scientificity – as no-one has really worked out how to systematically study the social use of the internet yet – are revealing. As some YouTube fights are staged fights rather than actual violent attacks involving victims, these figures are not accurate representations of real life incidents of girls' violence. Nevertheless, the fact that girls' fights, whether staged or real, vastly exceed boys fights on all search terms suggests at the very least a higher spectator value for girls' fights. While seriously

under-researched, the one study that addresses the issue suggests that the bragging rights for circulating fights through mobile phones to friends and peers, or uploading to YouTube, is the chief motivation for this type of violence (Spears et al. 2008). Some of these internet sites directly incite violence by asking viewers to rate 'chick fight' videos, to pass onto friends and to post their own. This fuels girl-on-girl violence by providing a normative on-line environment that encourages and rewards girls' violence. Girls who participate in these fights and upload to YouTube are active instigators of violence in the context of everyday life (Batchelor 2009; Burman, Batchelor and Brown 2001). Hence it would be difficult to deny some interrelationship between girls' uptake of social on-line networking with rising rates of girls' violence in their parallel real worlds, although how much is yet to fully appreciated, studied or confirmed.

There is no definitive answer to the extent to which the recorded rises in violence for girls are attributable to the socio-cultural rise of the violent femme, or the normalising influence of on-line social networking technologies that reward girls' violence. While speculative, the new permissibility of cyberspace – a space largely unregulated by parents, social control agencies and other authorities; where everyday informal social controls of place-based communities are suspended – does indeed operate as a new normalising domain which, at the very least, cultivates girls' aggression on- and off-line and rewards girl-on-girl fights that take place in their parallel real worlds. This has coincided with consistent and sharp rises recorded for girls' violence in precisely those affluent countries across the northern and southern hemispheres with high up-takes in social net-working among girls and increasing popularisation of violent femmes in consumer culture. While not attributing the rises in girls' violence to these two relatively recent socio-cultural phenomena, it would be premature to dismiss them as mere coincidence either. These are issues that require significant new research. That research needs to be framed by a feminist theory of female violence.

### **The case for a feminist theory of female violence**

Feminism was, and still is, wrongly held responsible for the recorded rises in female crime and violence in popular culture. In this context, reports of rising rates of female crime and violence have tended to be met with widespread scepticism from feminist scholars (Alder and Worrall 2004; Chesney-Lind and Irwin 2008), understandably defensive given myths that simplistically blame equal opportunity, girl power, or the rise of women's liberation or feminism as the primary cause. The origins of this myth-making began in the 1970s with the controversial 'sisters in crime' thesis that argued that, as women became more equal to men, so would the frequency and character of women's crime, violence, and aggression (Adler 1975; Simon 1975). During the 1980s the argument was refined to suggest that young women were increasingly displaying overt aggression, partly because women's liberation had allowed them greater economic and sexual freedom and dismantled some of the limitations and informal social controls on traditional sex roles (Campbell 1981). We have seen above how more recently the ladette thesis implicitly – if not explicitly – constructs feminism as responsible for the masculinisation of femininity and rises in girls behaving badly. The major flaw in the argument that feminism leads to increased female crime and violence is that studies of female offending persistently reveal that few embrace women's liberation (Campbell 1981; Chesney Lind and Sheldon 2004). As Carol Smart once famously remarked, 'It is unlikely that advocates of the women's movement are to be found among delinquent girls and criminal women' (Smart 1976: 74). Females who behave violently may be familiar with 'F' words but feminism is not generally one of them.

Female violence challenges deeply ingrained assumptions held by feminists, lawyers, criminologists, media commentators, parents and policy makers. Criminological theory has a long history of essentialising violence as a capacity associated primarily with boys, overlooking the capacity for the female sex to participate in and inflict violence. So it is hardly surprising that feminist criminologists too have overlooked female violent offenders – assuming women are



mostly victims and not perpetrators of violence (Morrissey 2002: 125-126; Wesley 2006). Female violence also challenges long-held feminist understandings of femininity as the non-violent sex, compared to the overwhelming masculinity of violence. Hence, feminist scholars have been reluctant to 'own the problem of women's use of violence' (Renzetti 1999: 51), preferring to reposition female violence in a context of less serious, social and relational aggression that occurs mostly in the context of girls negotiating peer networks as previously mentioned (Alder and Worrall 2004; Chesney-Lind and Irwin 2008; Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2012), or as women using violence in self defence against violent partners. There are some exceptions such as Morrissey's (2002) analysis of the violent crimes of Catherine Bernie and Valmae Beck<sup>12</sup> and Hester's (2012) analysis of female perpetrators of domestic violence against male partners. However, there is something troubling about rationalising most instances of female violence as the product of social control, vulnerability or victimisation of some kind.<sup>13</sup>

There is a limit to the denial of women's capacity to inflict violence and participate in conduct which many feminists would rather assign to men. According to Allen (1998), depictions of the violent woman as the victim rather than the perpetrator – or some blurring of both – stem from a refusal to allow the female sex to appear morally or personally culpable. Legal, academic and public discourses may attempt to reconcile this tension by constructing the violent woman as 'mad', 'bad', 'evil', or 'victimised' (Allen 1998; Morrissey 2002; Peter 2006). Feminism has a tendency, therefore, to reinforce the victim construct by repositioning the violent woman's actions within a context of diminished responsibility (Allen 1998). The denial of the existence of 'real' female violent offenders is the product of out-dated gender essentialism and feminist idealism about the passivity of femininity (Allen 1998). Consequently, female offenders who are wilful participants in acts of violence tend to be absent from feminist analysis; instead, they are described as media beat-ups, social constructs, girls acting like boys, or victims of net-widening policies that 'upcrim' girls' aggressive behaviour.

While the contexts in which violence occurs may have gendered dimensions – abandoning essentialist theories that construct violence according to a gendered binary – means that, when women commit violence, they cannot be said to be acting just like men. In other words, in non-essentialist frameworks, there is nothing inherently feminine or masculine about violence. Theories that blame feminism, like the ladette thesis which draws on a theory about masculinisation of femininity, or the sisters in crime thesis that assumes women are behaving more like men, are thus de-robed of their explanatory power.

I use this non-essentialist theoretical framework to examine the case of Private Lynndie England to tease out the possibilities for developing a feminist theory of female violence. Private First Class Lynndie England was one of three women – along with Sabrina Harman and Megan Ambuhl – charged with mistreating and assaulting prisoners detained in Abu Ghraib prison. Private England was convicted and sentenced to three years prison and dishonourably discharged from the US Army. Charles Graner, her lover and superior at the time, was also charged, convicted and sentenced to ten years jail. Private Lynndie England will long be remembered as the young boyish-looking female soldier, sexually humiliating Iraqi inmates of Abu Ghraib prison. One of the dehumanising photographs depicts Private England in an embrace with Graner, staring at a perverse triangle of naked men piled on top of each other. In another photo, with a cigarette dangling from one side of her mouth, like a gangster, she looks on approvingly and points her finger at a prisoner's penis as he is forced to masturbate. In another photo Private England engages in sexual humiliation by dragging a naked man around by the neck with a dog leash. He resists by pulling back on the leash but is clearly overpowered by her dominance. What is it about these images, the context in which they were taken as trophies, and the social reaction to them that emptied their political meaning and racialised context, and instead pointed the finger at feminism?

The metanarrative was framed by the repeated circulation of the photos. Tucker and Triantafyllos argue that the individualising gaze of the media on these few rogue prison guards had the effect of allowing Americans to distance themselves from the racialisation, dehumanisation and violence of the war on terror (Tucker and Triantafyllos 2008: 83). As Rogers puts it, Lynndie England, the lover of the torturer, was constructed 'as the hated symbol whose enigmatic quality and lack of feminine identification evokes the confusion in us all over precisely what it might mean to be a desirable subject in these times of anti-terror' (Rogers 2011: 77). Lynndie England's defence attorneys attributed the responsibility for her participation in the demeaning rituals of violence involving powerless prisoners to the influence of her then boyfriend and superior Graner, another prison guard (Kaufman-Osborn 2005: 616). She was represented as an instrument entirely of his will, lacking any agency of her own.

In one sense, Lynndie England represents the stereotypical victim of a brutal and masculine military hierarchy; yet, somewhat ironically, feminism was singled out by conservative commentators as the root cause of the unsavoury affair. Phyllis Schafley, conservative activist and author of *Feminist Fantasies*, assigned the blame to those who she called 'Clintonista feminazis' for feminising the American military. In an extraordinary attack on feminism, Schafley wrote:

The pictures are stark illustrations of the gender experimentation that has been going on in the U.S. military. ...That goal means masculinizing women and feminizing men ...The pictures show that some women have become mighty mean, but feminists can't erase eternal differences ... The result is a breakdown of military discipline and a dramatic coarsening of women and of men's treatment of women ... I suspect that the picture of the woman soldier with a noose around the Iraqi man's neck will soon show up on the bulletin boards of women's studies centers and feminist college professors. That picture is the radical feminists' ultimate fantasy of how they dream of treating men. Less radical feminists will quietly cheer the picture as showing career-opportunity proof that women can be just as tough as men. (Phyllis Schafer 2004)

But Phyllis Shafley's anti feminist rhetoric is far from convincing. This is a far right caricature of feminist voices, a strategy of denial, decoy and deflection. However, few – if any – feminists came to the defence of Private England, leaving a discursive space for anti-feminist ideology to construct feminism to blame. Harp and Struckman's (2010) discourse analysis of the 49 news media articles that initially framed the story illustrates how the media metanarratives singled out England as the embarrassment of a nation. The sub-politics of this narrative was that women did not belong in the US military and especially not in the front line. Women in the military transgress the dichotomous representations of white American women as housewives or mothers, or otherwise employed in labour related to their domesticity and their gender. Harp and Struckman argue that 'England's gender became a more prominent aspect of the story than the actual abuse and torture because it was an image that could not be reconciled' (Harp and Struckman 2010: 12).

There was more than gender politics involved, however. The recent release of The Constitution Project's Task Force on Detainee Treatment (The Constitution Project 2013), now widely referred to as the Torture Memos investigation, support Private England's defence that she was following the orders of superiors. The entry of women into the military served as a convenient decoy in the face of international embarrassment for the Bush administration. Feminism was wrongly blamed and England's responsibility for the atrocities of torture was exaggerated out of all proportion, leaving obscured the role of the CIA and other trained counter intelligence interrogators in the commission of systematic torture of terror suspects. A non-partisan investigation by The Constitution Project recently concluded 'that it is indisputable that the United States engaged in the practice of torture' (The Constitution Project 2013: 9). The prison

guards at Abu Ghraib were working in a geo-political context where the softening up of high value terror suspects using sexual humiliation before interrogation was an accepted normative practice in the war on terror.

Other female soldiers were involved in the torture of terror suspects but Private England was singled out. Why? Was it the images captured of a boyish-looking young woman from a disadvantaged rural background celebrating acts of sexual humiliation, violence and torture that rendered her susceptible to so much censure? Like the girls who capture their fights and load onto YouTube in a performative act of celebration, the images of England as a violent femme coincide with the cultural constructions that attribute female violence largely to the legacy of feminism. While this does not erase England's agency or that of the other prison guards involved in the torture of terror suspects, it does dislodge any reasonable interpretation that she was simply an instrument of her then lover's will to inflict torture, a convenient narrative that took root in popular culture.

A feminist theory of female violence would acknowledge the context of the power relations and gender politics in which these events unfolded. But a feminist theory would also acknowledge that Private Lynndie England – a boyish girl – was the enigmatic agent of state torture (Rogers 2011: 87), although not completely without will or responsibility as England also appeared to be a willing participant. A feminist analysis of the subsequent witch hunt and lynching of Private Lynndie England would acknowledge her agency and participation in these acts of violence, but argue that the normalisation of the atrocities of war was the real politic behind elevating her responsibility for torturing the prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Her gender was used as a weapon of war in the sexual humiliation of Arab male prisoners. This is reprehensible but feminism can hardly be held accountable. Referring explicitly to the involvement of female soldiers in the Abu Ghraib torture of prisoners, Claire Renzetti commented, 'In studying state crime, therefore, feminist criminologists must study women as perpetrators as well as victims' (Renzetti 2013: 95).

## Conclusion

One of the key achievements of feminist criminology has been to direct critical attention to the fact that men's violence far outweighs that for which women and girls are responsible. What is still largely missing from feminist criminology, however, is a sophisticated theory of female violence that considers the context, the politics, the power relations, the gender dynamics, and the intersectionality of specific instances of female violence. The main shortcoming of not having a sophisticated feminist theory of female violence is that it leaves uncontested anti-feminist explanations that circulate widely in popular culture when instances involving female violence become public issues – as the case of Lynndie England illustrates – or when rises in female violent crime rates become registered in public consciousness and popularised as 'girls behaving like boys'.

Fuelled by anti-feminist backlash politics, feminism was, and still is in many instances, wrongly scapegoated for occurrences and increases in female violence. A central challenge for future feminist research, then, is how to more convincingly explain the historical shifts in gendered patterns of violence, rather than simply deny, rationalise, or erase them. Claire Renzetti, internationally leading scholar and editor of *Violence Against Women*, sketched the outline of a feminist theory of violence (Renzetti 1999: 51). According to this outline, feminist theories of violence need to be contextualised rather than abstract and essentialist. They need to address the specificity of contexts in which women use violence, how it varies and what it means. This will require a whole new series of qualitative research projects taking women's experiences of violence as offenders as a starting point. The analyses have to be intersectional and not privilege gender alone. Renzetti also argues that a feminist theory of female violence needs to be generated through collaborative research between academics, practitioners and violent women,

so as to capture these varying perspectives and voices. Lastly, Renzetti argues that feminists must finally own the problem of women's violence (Renzetti 1999: 51). For feminism to be relevant in the public, cultural, political and criminological debates about heightened – albeit often exaggerated – social concerns relating to growing female violence, an effective and influential strategy must overcome the silence.

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- 1 An earlier study commissioned by the US Department of Justice in 1996 concluded unequivocally on its front cover that 'female violent crime arrest rates have increased' (Poe-Yamagata and Butts 1996). The study also noted, 'violent Crime Index offences between 1989 and 1993 increased by 55% for females compared to 33% for males' (Poe-Yamagata and Butts 1996:8). For the offence of aggravated assault, the increase was double for girls compared to boys over the same time frame (Poe-Yamagata and Butts 1996: 2).
  - 2 The data upon which this report was generated has been criticised for inflating girls' violent offences. Gilly Sharpe argues that shifts in the way the National Crime Reporting Standard operated from 2002 led to the recording of more petty offences, artificially inflating minor infringements and assaults committed by girls (Sharpe 2012: 33). She concludes that the steep rises in girls' delinquency recorded in the UK's *Criminal Statistics* was the outcome of shifting modes of criminalisation and not the deterioration of girl's behaviour (Sharpe 2012: 34).
  - 3 'In 2010–11, young men were around twice as likely as young women to be proceeded against by police, more than three times as likely to be proven guilty in the Children's Court, four times as likely to experience community-based supervision and five times as likely to be in detention' (AIHW 2012).
  - 4 The author has been collecting this administrative by-product data for 25 years either from the government department or the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research. Over such a lengthy period changes in counting rules for matters heard before the New South Wales Children's Courts have impacted on the quality of time series and the direct comparability of certain time frames. Some of the changes in counting rules have followed changes to the data custodian of the juvenile justice collection. From 1960 to 1983 the data was maintained and published by the New South Wales Department of Youth and Community Services (or its predecessors); from 1984 to 1990 by the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research; and since 1991 by the New South Wales Department of Juvenile Justice.  
The counting rule for data from 1960 to 1982 was based on final court appearances, not individuals, or proven offenders. Data for 1983 was reported according to a different counting rule, idiosyncratic to the time series, and has been excluded from the trend analysis for this reason. From 1984 to 1987 unpublished data for finalised court appearances was extracted from the Children's Court collection. Data from 1988 to 1990 is based on a slightly different set of counting rules, namely proven offenders for criminal matters and proven matters for welfare offences. This data is not directly comparable to the rest of the time series and has been excluded from the analysis of trends in crime rates, although included in Figure 1. Unpublished data from 1991 to 2004 for finalised court appearances by criminal matters is comparable to data collected from 1960 to 1982 and between 1984 and 1987. The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the New South Wales Department of Juvenile Justice for providing unpublished data disaggregated by sex from 1990-1991 to 2003-2004. More recent data has been sourced from NSW Children's Court Statistics, published by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.
  - 5 In terms of changes in specific offences over this period, the study concluded: 'Female participation in specific offences changed over this time, with significantly more females being proceeded against for breaching judicial orders, committing assault, liquor offences and offensive behaviour as well as maliciously damaging property ...The number of juvenile female offenders increased by more than a third whereas for juvenile males the increase was less than a tenth. Trends in offending by juvenile females mirrored those of all females, with the exception of shoplifting...' (Holmes, 2010: 10).
  - 6 There is evidence to suggest that the victims of girls' violence are mostly other girls. According to the Australian Crime Victim Survey, young people bear the greatest risk of being the victim of an assault. While young males aged between 15 and 24 have the highest risk of victimisation, young females aged 15-19 are more likely to know their attacker and to have been assaulted by a friend or family member, compared to male victims who at a greater risk of being attacked by a stranger (House of Representatives Inquiry into Youth Violence 2010: 20-21, Table 2.2). For young women aged 20-24, the offender was more likely to be a partner or an ex-partner rather than a friend or family member. This gender difference provides a clue into not only the patterns of victimisation but also the patterns of offending, with young women being assaulted predominantly by their friends or peers during early adolescence and, as they grow older, by their partners or ex-partners.

- <sup>7</sup> In the 1990s, scholars argued that young women were increasingly engaged in drug-related violence as a result of their increased involvement in the illicit drug economy (Maher 1997).
- <sup>8</sup> According to the ABS data, overall, 70% of boys and 56% of girls participate in sport but there are significant gender differences in the patterns of participation. Between 2003 and 2009, girls participation rate in martial arts had grown slightly from 3.6 % to 3.7% compared to 6.2% to 7.5% for boys; and, for Australian Rules football, from 0.7% to 0.9% for girls compared to 13.6% to 16% for boys (ABS 2011). Interestingly between 2003 and 2009, the participation of girls in skateboarding and rollerblading increased from 16.9% to 42.4% compared to 28.5% to 58.9% for boys (ABS 2011 Cat 41560.0). There were some differences in counting rules that account for some of the change.
- <sup>9</sup> Some researchers have argued that, as girls moved their subcultures from the privacy of their bedroom to the public world of the street, they too would come to the attention of police in the same way as boys for their increased participation in delinquent youth subcultures (McRobbie and Garber 1991). More recent research on girls' participation in gangs and youth subcultures confirms that girls in these gangs do indeed participate actively in violence between members mostly. (Mullins and Miller 2008)
- <sup>10</sup> See Castello 2010; Fewster 2010; Hickley 2009; Noone and McDougall 2010.
- <sup>11</sup> According to a recent on-line survey of 1,037 13-17 year-olds in America, nine out of ten use social networking; three out of four have a social network profile; one in five has a twitter account (Common Sense Media 2012: 9); and eight out of ten have a mobile phone (Common Sense Media 2012: 20). While the majority reported that social networking was mostly a positive experience, girls especially responded that they felt anxious about photos of themselves being posted onto the internet and nearly one third said they wished they lived in a world without Facebook. Interestingly, neither this survey nor the Youth Internet Safety Survey, which has been conducted twice in the US, asked about girls' use of the internet to promote or inflict harm to other girls. Like the studies of youth violence more generally, which assume that mainly boys engage in physical fighting, girls use of the internet to broadcast fights, fan conflict, promote, incite and reward girl-on-girl violence has been scoped out of these teen internet surveys.
- <sup>12</sup> Morrisey (2002) argues that the violent women of interest to feminist socio-legal theorists tend to fall into one of two categories: either victims (such as women who kill partners but are victims of battered wife syndrome); or women who act out violent feminist revenge fantasies against men, such as 'lesbian vampire killer' Tracey Wigginton (Morrisey 2002). Hence violent women who are sadists, rapists and murderers or otherwise wilful participants in violence, especially against other younger women, tend to be absent from feminist discourse and analysis, such as in the cases of Catherine Birnie and Valmae Beck, two Australian women convicted of rape and murder of young women who they had abducted with their male partners. Morrisey argues that these cases test the limit of feminist theory (Morrisey 2002).
- <sup>13</sup> In a similar vein, Peter's study of women who sexually abuse their daughters argues that maternal sexual abuse has been located outside understandings of femininity and motherhood (Peter 2006). This leads to simplistic portrayals of the crime which distort the seriousness and contexts of the female sexual abuse, leaving victims invisible and lacking in credibility, recognition and support from public and professional agencies (Peter 2006: 284). While some violent women (and men for that matter) may have experienced violent victimisation and social or economic disadvantages, women can simultaneously be victims and victimisers (Allen 1998; Peter 2006).

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