

# The lady killers

The fairer sex, eh? So how come violent crime is rising so fast among females? From 'Kill Bill' to Cheryl Tweedy, Emma Gold asks: why is it more shocking when a woman lashes out than a man?



What on earth has happened to the fairer sex? *Catwoman* is kicking ass at cinemas while in *Kill Bill I* and *II*, Uma Thurman's sexy assassin, the Bride, slays so many enemies that even Quentin Tarantino confessed he lost count of the number of dead.

Girl gangs are on the rise and bullying is now far more prevalent among girls than boys. The think tank, Demos, reported that young women aged between 15 and 17 scored higher than their male peers on a "pleasure in violence" scale. The female prison population grows apace: it more than doubled in the six years to 1999. In Scotland, according to the Scottish Executive, female violent crime has risen by 140 per cent in 10 years.

Are we really no different to men? Aren't women supposed to be less violent? Anna Motz, clinical and forensic psychologist and author of *The Psychology of Female Violence*, believes not: "Women have the same aggressive drives as men do. It's a question of how they express

them. Men are more likely to be violent against others in the public domain. Women tend to express their violence in the home, either against themselves or partners and children."

Motz is right that we take out our aggression in the privacy of our homes, says Steven Fitzgerald of the ManKind Initiative, a support group for male victims of violence: "A 1996 survey of several thousand people revealed that equal numbers of men and women suffered domestic abuse. But as women are five times more likely to report domestic violence, our perception is that it is a predominantly male crime. It's extremely difficult to admit. We've had blokes told to sod off by the police. Men feel emasculated and deeply ashamed."

When David, 50, reported that his wife had assaulted him to his local police station, the officer's first reaction was to laugh. David had tolerated a long history of domestic violence before he made that first call. His wife used to kick, bite and slap him. She threw dinner plates at his

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head, kicked him in the testicles and whacked him on the head with a vacuum-cleaner. When he finally told her he would retaliate if she continued to be violent, she retorted: "Don't touch me or I'll ring the police." Which she did. "When I explained the situation to them, they advised me to phone them next time she was violent," David said. He persisted with the police and they later logged his wife's assaults. Since their separation, his wife has been convicted of assault, for which she received a fine, and has three formal warnings for harassment.

Two television ads have annoyed David. The first for Walkers Crisps has Gary Lineker

socked in the face by a woman for stealing her crisps (pictured above). The second, a BBC ad for digital radio, has the bride's mother pinning the DJ to the floor and punching him repeatedly. "When I rang up to ask whether an ad showing a woman being punched by a man in these circumstances would ever be acceptable, they admitted it wouldn't. What's the difference?" David asks.

Perhaps we are supposed to find these funny because the idea that women hit men is such a preposterous one. What crazy woman would hit a man? We just don't want to believe that women are violent too. Domestic violence support groups for women obtain Government funding while ManKind does not.

Yet, because we find it hard to accept that women may be as violent as men, we also react with horror when they are. Naomi Campbell was vilified for hitting her PA on the head with a telephone and is seen as a first-class bitch. Paul Gascoigne repeatedly beat his wife and is



considered a lovable fool. After *Big Brother's* "fight night" this year, it was the violent woman and not the violent man who was evicted. The level of outrage at Maxine Carr has, at times, matched that to Ian Huntley: her crime, to lie for a psychopath; his, to murder two children. The vandalising of the Myra Hindley portrait, the outrage at the female suicide bomber, the furore over Girl's Aloud Cheryl Tweedy assault case – all demonstrate our disgust with women who transgress our ideas of womanhood.

Why can't we cope with violence by women? "We tend to have an idealised, sentimental view of women," says Motz. One reason we need to preserve the notion that women are all good is our terror of acknowledging that our mothers, on whom we were so dependent, have aggressive as well as loving feelings."

Marie Maguire, psychotherapist and author of *Men, Women, Passion and Power*, sees it differently: "There is a tendency now to talk of the sins of the mother. They seem to take much of the blame while very little is expected of the father, so when men are violent we don't condemn them in the same way." Cesare Lombroso, meanwhile, one of the first criminologists, argued that women who are "born criminals" are "monsters" who "belong more to the male than to the female sex".

But among non-human primates, violence by females is not unusual. Dawn Starin, primatologist, studied the female red colobus monkeys in the Gambia: "If an alien male from outside their social group attempted to attack infants, a gang of females would chase him to the ground, pin him down and bite him to death. Female non-human primates routinely form coalitions against males, sometimes driving them from the group or even killing them."

Among humans, however, female violence must be kept hidden. In many cultures women are taught that they should never feel or behave aggressively and that they should cheerfully accommodate those around them. When our defences are lowered before our period and anger surfaces, we are told we are irrational, ill and suffering from PMS.

If it is true that suppressed anger is the root of depression, could this be the reason women are twice as likely to suffer from depression than

men? Motz thinks so: "One of the goals of forensic psychotherapy working with depressed women is to uncover unexpressed rage."

The depiction of violent women in the mass media appears to be changing. The only female characters who used to appear in heroic cultural comics and films were either facile or second-rate. *Thelma and Louise* (1991) were portrayed sympathetically but ultimately punished for their transgressions and the film ended in their death. And while we might rejoice at *Catwoman* and the *Bride*, we must remember our liberated, powerful women are male creations. These violent heroines are sexualised male fantasies – Lara Croft, with her improbable figure and *Catwoman* in her PVC. In *Kill Bill*, the *Bride's* most gruesome acts of vengeance were against women, the men were mainly faceless drones.

Are these masochistic male fantasies on the big screen responsible for the increase in acceptability of female violence? While it may be true that socially sanctioned violence in the media has contributed to a general culture of violence, there is no consensus explaining the rise in violence by women. The trend in the past two decades for women adopting male attitudes, traits and drinking habits may be responsible for increased female delinquency, but studies into the correlation have produced mixed results. Nevertheless, female violence, long confined to the privacy of home, is now escaping into the public domain.

Before you remove all the knives from the kitchen drawers, consider this study by the American University in Washington into the role of gender in violent crime. It looked at homicide rates in 31 countries over an 18 year period and found that in no time or country did female aggression exceed that of male aggression. So, compared to you guys, we'll always be the fairer sex. ■

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Femme fatales, from left: Gary Lineker gets a smack from Helena Christensen for stealing her crisps in the Walkers ad; Naomi Campbell shows off her infamous rage; and Uma Thurman strikes out in 'Kill Bill', below: Tomb Raider's Lara Croft

