

51. • Meda Chesney-Lind

MEAN GIRLS, BAD GIRLS, OR JUST GIRLS: Corporate Media Hype and the Policing of Girlhood (new)

Meda Chesney-Lind, a professor of women's studies at the University of Hawai'i, is nationally recognized for her work on women and crime; her testimony before Congress resulted in national support of gender-responsive programming for girls in the juvenile justice system. Her recent book on girls' use of violence, *Fighting for Girls* (coedited with Nikki Jones), won an award from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency for "focusing America's attention on the complex problems of the criminal and juvenile justice systems." The following article was written specifically for this collection.

It seems as though the bad news about American girls just keeps coming, at least if you watch television or read the papers. Girls are going "wild," girls are "mean" (and certainly meaner than boys), and girls are even getting as violent as boys. Current media coverage of modern girlhood, at least in the United States, is virtually all grim, and it is also clear as to the source of the problem—girls are getting more like boys and that is bad news for girls.

As an example, on June 2001, an ABC report on trends in gang membership maintained that girls are "catching up with boys in this one area," "joining gangs for the same reasons as boys," and doing the same activities as boys: selling drugs and committing murder (Gibbs). Likewise, on July 28, 2009, New Jersey Attorney General Anne Milgram announced that law enforcement officials dismantled an all female-led, gang-involved narcotics ring. Dubbing the investigation "Operation Bloodette," Milgram went on to state that she wished "this was not one [glass] ceiling women were breaking" and that "women are taking over dominant roles in traditionally male-dominated gangs" (Read). Finally, in March 2006, ABC's *Good Morning America* contributed to these stories with its series titled, "Why Girls

Are Getting More Violent: Violence Is on the Rise among High School Girls" (ABC). One segment was specifically labeled "Girls Are Beating and Bullying."

This last headline introduces a theme closely related to the news media's obsession with girls' violence—a focus on "mean" girls. The manipulative and damaging characteristics of girls' social worlds have been the subject of high-profile bestselling books like *Odd Girl Out* (Simmons), and *Queen Bees and Wannabes* (Wiseman). These, in turn, spawned hit movies, like *Mean Girls*, and also innumerable articles. *The New York Times Magazine* ran a cover story titled, "Girls Just Want to Be Mean" where the author noted "it is not just boys who can bully." (Talbot 24), and other media outlets quickly jumped on the bandwagon, running stories titled "Girl Bullies Don't Leave Black Eyes, Just Agony" (Elizabeth), "She Devils" (Mercalf), and "Just Between Us Girls: Not Enough Sugar, Too Much Spite" (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*).

Books like *Odd Girl Out* and *Queen Bees and Wannabes* all rely on recent psychological research on aggression, particularly what is called "relational," "covert," or "indirect" aggression (Underwood et al. 248). The concept of relational or covert aggression relates to a repertoire of passive and/or indirect

behaviors (e.g., rolling eyes, spreading rumors, ostracizing, and ignoring), used with the "intent to hurt or harm others" (Crick and Grotpeter), and thus the concept expands the range of behaviors that are considered aggressive in nature.

By identifying a "relational," "covert," or "indirect" aggression, rather than physical type of aggression, researchers argued that they shattered the myth of the nonaggressive girl (Bjorkqvist and Niemela). These researchers note that girls are as aggressive as boys, when these indirect aggressions are considered. In fact, they claimed that they were not only shattering myths but that they were unraveling years of gender bias in which male researchers tended to only look at male problems. Bjorkqvist and Niemela argued that researchers, "the majority being males, . . . may, for personal reasons, find male aggression easier to understand and a more appealing object of study" (5).

While this characterization of the "discovery" has been widely accepted, there are reasons to be a bit more skeptical that this concept benefits girls. First, does this aggression really challenge stereotypes and myths about girls? Thinking about the behaviors included in relational aggression, this research is arguing that girls and women are manipulative, sneaky, mean-spirited, and backstabbing—hardly new ideas, which may, in fact, be one reason that the public and the media embraced them so quickly.

More importantly, the literature on relational aggression does not consistently support the notion that girls specialize in these forms of aggression while boys are more physically aggressive (Chesney-Lind et al.). For example, University of Georgia researchers randomly selected 745 sixth-graders from nine middle schools across six school districts in northeast Georgia. The student participants took computer surveys each spring semester for seven years, from sixth to twelfth grade (Orpinas et al.).

Key findings included the following. First, covert and relational aggression is extremely common; 96 percent of the students who participated in the study reported at least one act of relational aggression (meaning basically everyone is mean sometimes), 92.3 percent of boys and 94.3 percent of girls reported they'd been the victim of such an attack at one

point during the study period. Second, they found that boys admitted to significantly more acts of relational aggression than girls did, and girls were more likely to be victims. Finally, and of the greatest significance, of the meanest kids (the ones who fell into the "high" relational aggression group), 66.7 percent were boys and 33.3 percent were girls (Orpinas et al.).

So while the media focuses on the "meanness" of girls, the reality is that boys might be meaner than girls. But what of the media hype regarding those "bad" girls who are using violence, including those in gangs? Are girls really seeking violent equality with their male counterparts, as the media insists? There is also an important racial element to this discussion. Stock media imagery of girls, particularly girls in gangs, tends to suggest that these girls are just as menacing as their male counterparts. *Newsweek* did this by using a stereotypical headline, "Girls Will Be Girls," while showing a picture of a black girl holding a gun and wearing a mask, with the subtitle "Some girls carry guns. Others hide razor blades in their mouths" (Leslie and Biddle 44). In essence, black and Latina violence is positioned in ways that invite a contrast to the assumed "nonviolence" of white girls.

Media accounts of this "problem" also are caused by girls trying to act like boys. There's nothing new about this argument, by the way. In the 1920s, opponents of women's suffrage fretted about increases in "intensely immoral" behavior among the "modern age of girls" and, in the 1930s, commentators contended that "women becoming more criminally minded" as a result of "the fight for Emancipation" (Pollock 84). By the 1970s, the argument was that the second wave of feminism had "caused" a surge in women's serious crimes (Chesney-Lind).

The current media backlash to efforts to improve both girls and women's lives, though, has settled on girls' commission of violent crimes, particularly but not always in gangs. Is this true that girls are more violent today than in decades past?

Certain data, which the media tend to rely on heavily, suggest that girls are getting in trouble more often than in the past and also that they are engaged in more serious delinquent behavior. In 1983, arrests of girls accounted for roughly one in five arrests (21.4 percent),

but by 2013, girls accounted for nearly one in three juvenile arrests (28.8 percent) (United States, FBI). And while both male and female arrests have been declining in recent years, arrests of juvenile boys decreased far more steeply, decreasing 26.5 percent during the first decade of the twenty-first century compared to a decrease in girls' arrests of only 15.4 percent. The much vaunted "crime drop," at least among youth, was really a crime drop in just boys' official delinquency.

Data on juvenile courts suggest that the number of girls' cases referred to the court has also increased. The National Center for Juvenile Justice noted that most of the surge in male and female delinquency cases occurred between 1985 and 1997. During that time period, the reported increase in cases involving girls grew 97 percent versus a 52 percent increase for boys (Puzzanchera and Hockenberry 14). And the gendered pattern continues in the current period; between 1997 and 2011, the male delinquency caseload declined by 38 percent compared to a female caseload that decreased by only 22 percent. As a result, in 2011 females accounted for 28 percent of the delinquency caseload, up from only 19 percent in 1985 (Hockenberry and Puzzanchera). Much of this pattern is explained by soaring increases in arrests of girls for simple assault in over the past few decades. While these have recently leveled off, one study of court referrals found that "for females, the largest 1985–2002 increase was in person offense cases (202 percent)" (Snyder and Sickmund 160).

What about other data on girl's violence? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta has monitored youthful behavior in a national sample of school-age youth in a number of domains (including violence) at regular intervals since 1991 in a biennial survey titled the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. As an example, a review of the data collected over the 1990s and into this century reveals that, although 34.4 percent of girls surveyed in 1991 said that they had been in a physical fight in the previous year; slightly over half (50.2 percent) of the boys reported fighting. Two decades later, 2011, 24.4 percent of girls and 40.7 percent of boys said they had been in a physical fight in the last year ("Youth Risk"). In essence, the data show that girls have always been

more violent than their stereotype suggests but also that girls' violence, at least by their own accounts, has been decreasing, not increasing.

To further explore these issues about girl's self-reported violence and likelihood of arrest, Stevens et al. used several national self-report data sets to compare self-reported behavior with self-reported arrests in two different time periods (1980 and 2000) (Stevens et al.). This research found that girls who admitted to simple assault in 1980 had about a one-in-four chance of being charged with a crime, compared to girls in 2000, who had about a three-in-four chance of arrest. Furthermore, black girls in 2000 were nearly seven times more likely as their 1980 counterparts to be charged with a crime.

In short, while girls had long reported that they were acting out violently, their arrests, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, did not necessarily reflect that reality. Instead, girls' arrests tended to emphasize petty and status offenses (like running away from home); by the 1990s, that had changed dramatically, as more girls were arrested, particularly for such seemingly "masculine" offenses as simple assault—and this pattern was particularly pronounced among black girls.

Research increasingly suggests that these shifts in girls' arrest patterns are not products of a change in girls' behavior, with girls getting "more" violent. Rather, girls are being more heavily policed, particularly at home and in school (Chesney-Lind and Irwin). Girls are being arrested for assault because of arguments with their parents, often their mothers (Buzawa and Hotaling), or for "other assault" for fighting in school because of new zero-tolerance policies enacted after the Columbine shootings (*Criminalizing*). In decades past, this violence would have been ignored or labeled a status offense, like being "incorrigible" or a "person in need of supervision." Now an arrest is made.

Taking a global look at the American obsession with bad, violent, and mean girls is also important. Consider that the work of two most recent recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize (Malala Yousafzai and Kallash Satyarthi) reflects a growing global focus on girls' rights, especially their right to education and to be safe from abuse, particularly physical abuse.

sexual abuse, and early marriages ("Nobel Peace"). This international concern about the extensiveness of girls' victimizations and girls' rights stands in stark contrast to the discourse on girls in the past twenty-five years in the United States, where both media and policymakers have been expressing concern about

the growing numbers of "bad" and "violent" girls coming into the juvenile justice system. Clearly, it is time to stop bashing girls in the United States and start entering the global conversation about improving their lives and futures. Our girls are not getting worse—they are getting short changed.

WORKS CITED

- Bennett, Samantha. "Just Between Us Girls: Not Enough Sugar, Too Much Spite." *Pittsburgh-Post Gazette*, 5 June 2002, pp. 3–5.
- Bjorkqvist, Kaj, and Pirkko Niemela. *Of Mice and Women: Aspects of Female Aggression*. Academic Press, 1992.
- Buzawa, Eve S., and Gerald T. Hotaling. "The Impact of Relationship Status, Gender, and Minor Status in the Police Response to Domestic Assaults." *Victims and Offenders*, vol. 1, 2006, pp. 323–60.
- Chesney-Lind, Meda. "Women and Crime: A Review of the Literature on the Female Offender." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1986, pp. 78–96.
- , Merry Morash, and Katherine Irwin. "Policing Girlhood? Relational Aggression and Violence Prevention." *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2007, pp. 328–45.
- Chesney-Lind, Meda, and Katherine Irwin. *Beyond Bad Girls: Gender, Violence and Hype*. Routledge, 2008.
- Crick, Nicki R., and Jennifer K. Grotpeter. "Relational Aggression, Gender, and Social-Psychological Adjustment." *Child Development*, vol. 66, 1995, pp. 710–22.
- Criminalizing the Classroom: The Over-Policing of New York City Schools*. New York Civil Liberties Union/American Civil Liberties Union, 2007.
- Elizabeth, Jane. "Girl Bullies Don't Leave Black Eyes, Just Agony." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 10 April 2002, p. A1.
- Gibbs, B. "Number of Girls in Gangs Increasing." *ABC*, 19 June 2001, abclocal.go.com/wtvd/features/061901_CF_girlsgangs.html.
- Hockenberry, S., and C. M. Puzzanchera. *Juvenile Court Statistics 2011*. National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2014.
- Leshe, C., N. Biddle, D. Rosenberg, and J. Wayne. "Girls Will Be Girls." *Newsweek*, 2 Aug. 1993, p. 44.
- Metcalf, F. "She Devils." *Courier Mail* [Queensland], 22 June 2002, p. L6.
- "Nobel Peace Prize Winners Malala Yousufzai and Kailash Satyarthi Make South Asia Proud." *Pakistan*, UNICEF, www.unicef.org/pakistan/media_9026.htm.
- Ortega, P., et al. "Gender Differences in Trajectories of Relational Aggression Perpetration and Victimization from Middle to High School." *Aggressive Behavior*, vol. 41, 2014, pp. 401–12.
- Pollock, Joycelyn. *Women's Crimes, Criminology, and Corrections*. Waveland, 2014.
- Puzzanchera, C. M., and S. Hockenberry. *Juvenile Court Statistics 2010*. National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2013.
- Read, Phillip. "'Operation Bloodette' Nets 43 Members of Female-Led Drug Ring." *The Star-Ledger*, New Jersey On-Line, 28 July 2009, www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2009/07/operation_bloodette_nets_43_me.html.
- Sikes, Gini. *8 Ball Chicks*. Anchor Books, 1997.
- Simmons, Rachel. *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*. Harcourt, 2002.
- Snyder, H. N., and M. Sickmund. *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report (NCJ 178257)*. United States, Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2006.
- Stevens, Tia, et al. "Are Girls Getting Tougher, or Are We Tougher on Girls? Probability of Arrest and Juvenile Court Oversight in 1980 and 2000." *Justice Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 5, 2011, pp. 719–44.
- Talbot, Margaret. "Girls Just Want to Be Mean." *The New York Times Magazine*, 24 Feb. 2002, pp. 24–64.
- Underwood, Marion K., et al. "Top Ten Challenges for Understanding Gender and Aggression in Children: Why Can't We All Just Get Along?" *Social Development*, vol. 10, 2001, pp. 248–66.
- United States Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States—2013*. Government Printing Office, 2014.
- "Why Girls Are Getting More Violent: Violence is on the Rise Among High School Girls." *Good Morning America*, ABC, 11 Mar. 2006.
- Wiseman, Rosalind. *Queen Bees and Wannabees: Helping Your Daughters Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and other Realities of Adolescence*. Crown Publishers, 2002.
- "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—1991–2001." *CDC Surveillance Summaries*. United States, Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control, 1992–2012.