

off our backs

a women's newsjournal

Man Bites Dog! How the main—stream media obscure the fact of male violence

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Man Bites Dog!

I was watching "Law & Order," a television show about a law firm, the other night, and a familiar feeling of confusion came over me. The show was about topics of concern to feminists: sexual harassment, violent reprisal for the breakup of an affair, women working in jobs that used to be men-only domains. But there was something wrong. And I began to realize that I got a similar feeling reading the newspaper, watching the news, and going to movies. Something has been happening in popular culture: the sexism that is so obvious in everyday life plays differently in the media.

The media and popular culture have a lot of power to influence what people both know and think about things, so it matters who or what controls them. The powerful media machines of pop culture are controlled primarily by men—white men—and by the need to make a profit. These two facts mean that the general public in the U.S. can easily be misinformed and confused about issues that directly affect all women's lives as well as the lives of people of color and people living in poverty.

When a clear message about a women's issue is in the news, great progress can be made. When the Anita Hill hearings were being held, the issue of sexual harassment received a lot of attention, and many women learned about their legal rights to a workplace free of this kind of coercion.

But hard-won progress and carefully researched and proven facts can be erased from people's minds by one high-budget pop culture movie: think what *Fatal Attraction* did to people's recognition that by far it is *women*—not men—who in reality need to fear stalking and violent reprisal when they get involved with the wrong *man* and then try to break up with *him*.

Why do the news (and popular) media end up fostering misperceptions? Of course, one reason is that a basic premise of journalism is that if it is not news, it's not worth printing. Why? Because if it is not news, it will not sell. Stories that go contrary to expectations are news. The expected is not news.

A dog bites a man? That is not news. Man bites dog? That is news. If a man beats his wife, it is not news, but if a woman beats a man, it's news. Likewise, men rape about 500,000 women per year, some with foreign objects that cause severe damage to the woman's vagina. That is not news. Clitoral mutilations occur perhaps every day.

That is not news. One woman severs a man's penis. That's news.

In routine news reporting in the United States, male violence towards women is not news. Like a fender-bender in a large city's commuter traffic, it's not nothing, but it's the kind of news not reported as an individual story. It is saved up and reported as statistics. Although it's bad, it's not common, and therefore not newsworthy. There was a domestic disturbance and a man broke his wife's arm?—not a front-page story, just a statistic (572,032 women per year are attacked by their intimate partner). But a woman broke a man's arm? I see a TV miniseries coming.

Women's violence is seen as more sensational, more unusual, and more surprising than men's violence, and thus is over reported on or overemphasized in the news media. For example, the *Washington Post* recently featured a front-page story about a group of women who ganged up on and murdered another woman. The story received extensive treatment, written like a novel and jumping to a full half page of text with photos. The article acknowledged that this kind of murder—several women knifing another woman to death—was rare (it only occurs in 0.036 percent, that is, 36 hundredths of one percent, of murders in the United States). But the extent of the coverage served to give this murder more notice than would be given to a similar murder committed by a group of men.

A violent crime committed by a woman is remarkable just because a female committed it. Violent crimes by males are viewed as generic, so that news stories often neglect to even mention specifically that males committed them. Thus, for example, the Columbine and other school shootings were said to have been committed by "children" or "students," obscuring the fact that these were crimes committed by males.

The cumulative effect all this has on the reader is that it fosters a dramatic overestimate of women's violence compared with men's. Psychological research tells us that repetition has a strong effect on memory. It only takes three times driving to work a certain way before it becomes "your way." So let's say it only takes three full-blown stories about women's violence to make us have a sense that "it happens all the time," just like three trips to work become "I always go that way." Yet the

How the mainstream media obscure the fact of male violence

same week we see three stories on women's violence, hundreds of worse crimes perpetrated by men go unreported, or are reported only in the form of statistics. The result is a skewed sense of how much female violence there is in comparison to male violence. The result is that even in feminist

discussions I hear people say things like "women are just as violent as men."

Unfortunately, the news media are only part of the problem. Popular culture outlets such as TV shows and movies contribute even more to these skewed perceptions. As with the news media,

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Law & Order And the Art of the Patriarchal Reverse

On the prime-time crime show "Law & Order," a woman lieutenant in the Navy is on trial for killing an officer. The story is that she was having an affair with him and he tried to break it off, so she shot him. Throughout the show the earnest male lawyer has numerous confusing conversations with a young female colleague in which she supports the woman's claim that she was being sexually harassed by the male officer and that the murder was self-defense. The male lawyer disagrees and gathers evidence of an affair and breakup. During the woman's trial, somehow her defense comes down to her statement that she is a trained naval officer, who would never let emotions interfere with clear logical thought. In other words, she would never let her emotions over a breakup cause her to kill a man. The male lawyer then produces a tape-recording of her trying to land a plane on a ship during a storm. On the tape she falls apart, cries, and gets angry at an officer over the radio and shouts at him. With that, her supporters leave the courtroom and she is left alone on the stand, presumably guilty of murder.

The number of patriarchal reversals is astounding. Let's take it apart and see how they work to obscure the reality of male violence and male sexual harassment of women. First, the writers of the show accuse a woman of committing a crime that is in reality typically committed by men: killing a woman who tries to break up with them.

Second, they portray this woman as claiming the supposed masculine characteristic of cold rationality. This characteristic is particularly highly prized in the lore about naval aviators—think *Top Gun*—who are predominantly men. In reality, women trying to succeed in this area do have to demonstrate this characteristic.

Third, they show that she does not in fact have this characteristic. Here they get her with a double-whammy: Her female emotionality makes her both fail as an aviator (men's work) and succeed at murder (but they forgot to notice that this is also men's work). Are we forgetting the reality here that it is primarily men who commit this kind of "crime of passion"? By portraying a woman's over-emotionality as the cause of this murder, the writers imply that men, who are after all the successful cool and rational naval aviators, would not commit such a crime, when in fact this is a predominantly male crime. The writers are ultimately reinforcing the stereotype of men's supposed rationality and women's supposed over-emotionality, while erasing the reality that men commit most violent crimes of passion.

Fourth, they dismiss the idea that she might have been sexually harassed by the male officer, thus erasing the well-known reality that women breaking into predominantly male fields face severe hazing and harassment (remember Tail-Hook anyone?).

The writers probably did not have an overt agenda of debunking feminism. It's just that unexpected plot twists make for good stories, and, after all, that whole man-harasses-woman-subordinate thing has been just sooo overdone. It has to do perhaps more with men's comfort level than with intentional erosion of feminist analyses.

But as feminist consumers of mainstream back-lash culture, we must maintain our awareness of the reversals and confusion that are eroding our efforts to address and change the realities of harassment, job discrimination, and male violence against women. We don't LIVE in postfeminism. We just watch it on TV.

Embracing Hypocrisy

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Yet at the very same time, I am very uncomfortable and critical of third wave theories, and often think that young feminists do not dig deep enough or look honestly enough at oppression of women.

I am disconcerted that more young women do not see the negative aspects of the film, and I don't understand how I, like many others, can set my politics aside and enjoy a film such as this.

This internal struggle has brought me an understanding of how all feminists have to live with contradictions and hypocrisies. If it isn't a movie like *Charlie's Angels* that we enjoy despite the sexism, then we may enjoy the country music songs that talk about little ladies and making some woman a fine wife and mother some day or the hip hop song glamorizing womanizing.

Reclaiming a Feminist Moment

Despite all the misogyny and silliness of the movie, there was one scene in particular that I thought could be legitimately classified as having a feminist undertone. In this scene, Drew

Barrymore has been held hostage by a gang of bad guys. She is tied to a wooden chair and her arms tied behind her back. She is seemingly defenseless. As one of the bad guys is walking out of the room, he offers Drew up by asking the other six men in the room if they like "angel cake." This definitely feels like a creepy gang rape reference. But when the men go to attack Drew, she holds out her legs wide open in a V position and yells stop. She then proceeds to tell them how she will get out of this precarious situation by fighting all of them with her hands tied behind her back. The men advance towards her and she single-handedly knocks all of them to the ground escaping without a scratch.

Now there are a few points that are really important in this scene. One is that Drew is not dressed in sexy, revealing clothes. She is wearing pants, a T-shirt and combat boots. Second she is directly addressing the issue of rape and vulnerability by holding her legs out in a V to actually stop the men from attacking. And third, when she delivers

dialogue to the men, she does not speak in a sexy soft tone, she tells them (albeit with a smirk on her face) directly and clearly how she will defend herself against all of them and win. And finally, she does exactly that, no apologies, no hesitation.

Obviously I wish for and work for a world where the threat of violence and actual violence against women was not a norm. *Charlie's Angels* did nothing to present another world-view where this did not exist. But what it did do, was portray scenes where women were able to physically defend themselves against the violent attacks of men. I think these scenes are very important for women to see, especially heterosexual women who often live, work, and interact intimately with men.

The Issue of Violence

I'm a gal who is pretty damn sensitive to watching violence on the big screen. There have been plenty of times where I have felt physically ill and psychologically saddened by the bloodbaths that have become common in

Hollywood features. I've never been a big action film fan, but *Charlie's Angels* was different. The fight scenes were done *Matrix* style as the actors flipped around in the air and achieved inhuman speed, height and power as they battled their opponent. There was virtually no blood in the entire movie and to me the violence was not as hard to watch because of the space age feel that the fighting scenes possessed.

Charlie's Angels was no feminist manifesto. But I had a good time watching the film, even though I could see the problems and hear the feminist analysis running through my head like a freight train. Ultimately I made choices as to how I would see and feel about the film. I chose to see the women as powerful—even with the knowledge that women's power was being packaged and sold to me like a case of Spam on special at the Piggly Wiggly, and I chose to reclaim parts of the movie as feminist. Most importantly, I have learned to embrace my own contradictions and know that we all, as feminists, have our hypocrisies to live with.

by jenn smith

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the male-dominated pop culture outlets seem markedly drawn to stories that misrepresent the material realities of women's and men's lives in a way that hides male culpability and confuses issues that feminists have worked hard for a generation to clarify. The story lines commonly revolve around reversals of reality: first portray a typically male behavior or crime as having been done by a woman, then generate a lot of confusion about what it all means. Or portray a reality of women's lives as something experienced by a man instead. Look at the themes of some popular shows:

- In a "Law & Order" episode a woman is jilted, stalks and murders the man who dumped her, then tries to use a false accusation of sexual harassment to excuse her crime.
- In another "Law & Order" episode, a man has trouble finding daycare and combining work and parenting.
- On "Ally McBeal"—the law firm defends a reverse sex discrimination case.
- On VH1, a show on porn stars becoming rock stars implies that female porn stars freely choose that career the same way male rock stars choose their careers.
- In "Boogie Nights," a movie that has now reached cable TV, the exploitation of a male porn star is sympathetically portrayed, while the movie itself continues to demean and exploit female porn stars.

Reversal and confusion is a recurrent, if not the only, theme on "Ally McBeal": I can just imagine the charmingly befuddled star saying, in a plaintive, mystified voice: "Well, women can be sexist too, can't they?" and I can just hear her ask, "Women are also violent, aren't they?" and I can easily imagine her saying, "I used to think that sexual harassment was what men did to guard their position of power in the workplace, but mixing sex and office politics also happens between two women now, doesn't it?...Oh it's just all so confusing! I give up."

Are there any TV shows about real people's lives? In fact there are TV dramas about men abusing women, men leaving their children, women surviving as single moms and holding down two jobs. But these shows are ghettoized on

the Lifetime TV network—TV for women. They are popularly regarded as sappy tearjerkers not to be taken seriously, much like daytime soap operas. These are not the stuff of mass network TV seen by millions.

Pop culture is busy gender-neutralizing away such realities as that men commit significantly far more murders against both men and women than women do, that sexual harassment by men of women far exceeds cases of the opposite, that "spouse" abuse is a crime committed by men over 90% of the time, and that anywhere from 80% to 97% of violent crimes from simple assault, to armed robbery, to sexual assault, are committed by men (data from Department of Justice statistics for 1998).

But in stark contrast to factual reality,

Gender Neutralizing Male Violence

The Washington Post recently covered the story of a white middle-class man in Herndon, VA, who shot his two children and his wife, set their house on fire, and then shot himself. This kind of crime, familicide, is committed about 50 times per year in the United States. It is nearly always the father/husband who commits this kind of multiple murder-suicide. (When it is not, it is still not the mother/wife: for instance in another familicide this year involving multiple children in three Kansas families, the father and a step-father were charged with the crimes.)

The Post's headline was gender neutral: "When a Smoldering Nuclear Family Explodes." But it wasn't the family that exploded, it was the man. This kind of headline, typical for crimes committed by men, serves to obscure the fact that it is overwhelmingly men, not families; men, not people; men, not spouses who commit these kinds of crimes.

pop culture makes it appear we are living in postfeminism: Where both women and men routinely break people's arms in anger. Where just as many women sexually harass men in the workplace as vice versa. Where prostitutes choose their career as freely as brain surgeons do, without coercion or a web of abuse, poverty and drug addiction.

A key question to ask is whom does this confusion benefit? It benefits the system of male domination by not challenging men to take responsibility for the ways they use violence and sexism to maintain power over others. Men will go to great lengths to prevent feminists from pointing out the faults of men and masculinity. It serves men's comfort level to keep popular culture male-centric and to label any truth-telling about men's violence as male-bashing. And men are well positioned to control how issues are addressed in popular culture: it is by far men who control the networks, the news media, and the decision-making about what goes on TV.

When viewing pop culture, the caveat is: don't be fooled by anecdotal evidence or by melodramatic stories trying to confuse the issue. It is simple: men commit the overwhelming majority of violent crimes. Men wage war. Men beat, murder, stalk women significantly more often than women commit these behaviors, and when men do it, it is more severe.

Ally McBeal may be confused, but we're not.

by jennie ruby

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