

## Does Violence Have a Sex?

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**While women are first and foremost seen as victims of violence, C. Cardi and G. Pruvost show that they can also perpetrate it. Women's violence tends to be sidelined, downplayed or made invisible, and is inextricably linked to their image, testifying to the sexual dimension of the notion of violence itself.**

Reviewed: Coline Cardi and Geneviève Pruvost (dir.), *Penser la violence des femmes*, La Découverte. Preface by Arlette Farge, 2012, 440 p.

Women's violence has long been a blind spot in social science research on violence, with a few rare exceptions. The link between "women", on the one hand, and "violence", on the other, is mainly broached in terms of the victimisation of women. The challenge taken up by the editors of the volume "*Penser la violence des femmes*" is twofold: collating a large number of specific studies about women's violence, from varied fields and disciplines, while also providing an extensive introduction that offers a theoretical and analytical framework for understanding the subject. The articles gathered in this book present and illustrate this range of different possible narratives for women's violence within four broad areas: political violence; the private and the political; how women's violence is handled institutionally; how the figure of the violent woman is formed and deformed.

### Violence and its records and sources

The strong point of this book is that it does not merely present a collection of various studies concerning different spaces and periods, from sociological, historical, anthropological and historical perspectives, it also enrolls them within a solid and original theoretical framework, thereby creating a novel research object. Understanding women's violence means considering its existence, its very possibility, outside the naturalising patterns that would preclude it from the outset. This also means considering the historical process through which it has been made invisible within the different research conducted on violence. Consequently, in order to "unearth, denaturalise, contextualise, historicise and re-politicise women's violence" the authors suggest a performative definition of violence, which "cannot be separated from a process of description". The preface therefore puts forward a classification of the "grand narratives" of women's violence and the processes that render it invisible, on the basis of existing, but also non-existing, research: forms of female violence that have not been studied or have been denied, that have been made invisible, such as political violence committed by women. The book includes several articles establishing women's participation in political violence in a variety of contexts: pre- and post-revolutionary Paris (Clara Chevalier, Jean-Clément Martin) the Commune (Quentin Duclermoz); contemporary Lebanon and Palestine (Sonia Daya-Herzbrun); the armed conflicts in Peru and Northern Ireland (Camille Boutron, Maritza Felices-Luna); the Rwandan genocide (Violaine Baraduc).

This little-known violence is described, within an initial “grand narrative”, as being outside the frame of reference; its narrative is non-existent and it is denied. This denial can lead to it simply being forgotten or being artificially considered as something new when the political and media gaze finally comes to rest upon it. This is the case, for example, concerning urban violence and different forms of delinquency, which some consider a recent phenomenon. David Niget puts forward a “genealogy” of the moral panic caused by the supposed “appearance” of girls’ violence. He shows that, contrary to alarmist twenty-first-century headlines, violence on the part of girls, particularly from working-class areas, is far from a novelty and has regularly been the subject of media and scientific attention since industrialisation in the nineteenth-century and the emergence of juvenile delinquency as a notion. According to him, the lower presence of girls’ violence in archives is due to the difference in how violence committed by girls and boys was treated, and in particular the absence of *maisons de correction* (youth correction institutions, similar to the UK borstals) for girls, who were instead put in the care of religious institutions. Dominique Duprez also highlights girls’ delinquent violence, presenting the results of a study of girls involved in criminal activity in Brazil: girls’ participation is almost never mentioned by specialist literature on the subject, whereas they in fact make up a sixth of the minors brought before the law.

In order to put feminine violence back in its historical context and show the reality of its existence, Coline Cardi and Geneviève Pruvost suggest systematically examining the police and legal sources that record it, despite the fact that these records depend on the political perspective taken on this violence – violence that cannot exist will not be recorded and with hindsight is then considered not to have existed at all.

A person’s sex is one of the main factors in perceptions of their degree of dangerousness and the severity of their actions, as shown by Maxime Lelièvre and Thomas Léonard regarding defendants facing immediate trial: in similar situations, women are almost systematically less likely to be sentenced than men. The statistical non-existence of women’s violence also implies that it is not taken on board by the institutions that deal with violence. This is the case, as discussed by Vanessa Watremez, where domestic violence among lesbian couples is concerned, as the latter are excluded from the protocols that exist to deal with conjugal violence.

In their introduction, the book’s editors do not hide the role that the feminist movement has played in rendering women’s violence invisible because “from the political and legal point of view, it seemed more important, if not more urgent, to bring about recognition of women’s position as victims of masculine domination, through the violence to which they are subjected”. The resulting and inevitable *hierarchy established among struggles* contributed to the under-developed nature of research on women’s violence, but also to a lack of public policies dealing with this violence.

### **Downplaying and naturalising women’s violence**

Women’s violence cannot always be passed over in silence and so another process then becomes necessary: it must be framed within a narrative that acknowledges its existence. In this case, women’s violence is played down, or incorporated in a reading that allows it to be normalised and put back into a reassuring theoretical framework. The authors underline two conflicting manners in which women’s violence is placed under control: it is either enrolled in a naturalising reading of gender, and therefore considered as something inherent to the feminine which requires civilising, or it is thought of as subordinate to men’s violence,

and therefore as reinforcing masculine domination. Women's violence can be naturalised in several manners, taking a culturalist, biologising or psychologising perspective. Such readings, for example, relegates criminal women to a form of hysteria that results in their violence being handled in a very particular way: it is their bodies and sexuality that are seen as responsible for their deviancy and placed under control. More often than not, it is therefore medical-psychiatric institutions that are responsible for dealing with women's violence when it is recognised, whereas men are subject to "traditional" forms of repression – the police, the law and prison.

Another way of depriving women of responsibility for their acts of violence consists in considering it as a consequence of men's violence and of masculine domination. In this way, the kamikaze Arab women that Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun studies are seen as the necessarily dominated instruments of men's fanaticism, while the women from *Action directe* discussed by Fanny Bugnon are presented as women in love, the victims of their emotions. From another perspective, domestic violence committed by women within a heterosexual couple is also often seen as the consequence of violence on the part of their partner. Looking at Algerian women experiencing a family break-up, Clothilde Leas shows that they are not only the victims of violence at the hands of their husbands, they are sometimes responsible for violence – including physical violence – against these husbands, against their children, and often against themselves. This (re)appropriation of violence cannot only be seen through the lens of "reaction" as this would, once again, deprive these women of their agency. Clothilde Lebas suggests, on the contrary, considering these fits of violence, despite their excessive nature, as "spaces of possibility" where power can be regained. Women's violence within the family is also the subject of Nehara Feldman's article looking at the almost daily acts of violence carried out by mothers against their children in a village in Mali.

### **Troubling the gender order?**

A third form of narrative overturns the order of the sexes and leads, depending on the case, either to the domination of men by women – along the mythologized model of the Amazons – or to a lack of differentiation between the sexes. This third way of approaching women's violence is often found in the sphere of the arts and fiction, because reality rarely leaves room for violence capable of overturning or subverting the power relations between the sexes. Eric Fassin's article, for example, looks at the modern Amazon figures put forward in the cinema, from Valérie Solanas's *Scum manifesto* to Virginie Despentes's *Baise-moi*. As for Raphaëlle Guidée, she focuses on political violence by women in literature and shows to what extent the very possibility of this violence drastically disrupts gender categories.

Women's violence does not necessarily entail reversing domination, but can be part of a movement towards equality, particularly through women's access to professions that use violence (the police, the army, etc.). Moreover, access to violence can be an initial step towards access to political power, as Dominique Godineau shows regarding the May 1795 uprising. The introduction underlines the paradoxical nature of a feminist call for women's access to violence, as opposed to the non-violent ideal often fore-grounded by feminist movements. Coline Cardi and Geneviève Pruvost show that the stakes of understanding women's violence are different to those of advocating its use. It is essential to recognise that this violence exists and to study it in order to end the recurring tendency to make it invisible, which contributes to constructing differences between the sexes. Understanding women's violence thus allows gender relations to be challenged.

In conclusion to their remarkable introduction, Geneviève Pruvost and Coline Cardi question the relevance of gender as a tool for analysing violence. They show that it is necessary in order to rethink the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate violence, between visible and hidden violence and between the public and the private. In this way, the book as a whole constitutes an essential tool for understanding gender, on the one hand, and violence, on the other, by offering both a theoretical framework for women's violence and a large number of examples of the all too rare research on the subject.

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