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## Lady Killers: Twenty Years of Magazine Coverage of Women Who Kill Their Abusers

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## LADY KILLERS

### Twenty Years of Magazine Coverage of Women Who Kill Their Abusers

Pamela Hill Nettleton

When a woman accepts a date with a man, he may wonder, "Do we have anything in common?" but she must wonder, "Will he kill me?"

If a woman is beaten or murdered, it is almost always by her boyfriend or husband. Nearly one in four women are beaten or killed by an intimate partner,<sup>1</sup> and that number is likely low, because most victims of domestic violence do not report it.<sup>2</sup> This intimate partner is overwhelmingly likely to be male: men commit 100% of the rapes, 92% of the physical assaults, and 97% of the stalking acts against women, and 70% of the rapes, 86% of the physical assaults, and 65% of the stalking acts against other men.<sup>3</sup>

Women are measurably less violent than men; although women are more than half of the U.S. population, they commit fewer than 15% of the homicides—but more than half of those murders are of their intimate partners.<sup>4</sup> Women who fight back physically and/or kill their batterers are rare, and media coverage of them and studies of that coverage are also rare—but understanding how those public, mediated conversations about violent women are conducted is critical to addressing this troubling and long-standing issue of social justice that crosses class and race boundaries. Before communities can meaningfully and effectively address domestic violence, they must come to a clear understanding of what it is and how society characterizes this type of

violent event. Complete analysis of media coverage of the issue is required. Without this, it is difficult to identify the actual problem, situate it within appropriate cultural and social contexts, and work to alleviate domestic violence. By illuminating an under-explored area of media narratives, this study challenges misconceptions about domestic violence and contributes to productive community conversation.

This study examines 20 years of magazine articles, analyzing articles about women who attack and kill their violent domestic partners, most often by using a gun. An understanding of the cultural characterization of women who fight back and shoot their attackers fills a gap in knowledge in the field of feminist media studies, and answers the research question: When battered women kill their abusers, how do popular magazines characterize them for the public? Media rarely tell domestic abuse stories of women who fight back, and this may contribute to a culture in which men feel they can abuse women without physical consequences. Before social and cultural change can occur, the role of popular media in disseminating patriarchal ideology must be recognized.<sup>5</sup> That is where “real social change takes place”, argues Cuklanz.<sup>6</sup> Women’s magazines play a “socializing function” and shape “society’s sense of culture and our sense of self in culture.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, knowing how magazines characterize abused women who attack their attackers contributes to understanding both male and female attitudes toward domestic violence, and may help support the exploration of solutions.

An understanding of why women kill their mates is limited; Bourget and Gagne write, “Despite much research on spousal homicide, few studies have addressed spousal homicides committed by women.”<sup>8</sup> Gender in criminological study has been ignored and female deviance marginalized in sociology and media.<sup>9</sup> This study breaks new ground in that it highlights the chronically under-reported phenomenon of the abused women who kills her attacker.

This study is a qualitative, intertextual narrative analysis of domestic violence coverage, situating this work within the body of feminist media studies of violence against women and within the cultural studies perspective of Stuart Hall’s theories of representation and of the power of the absent representation.<sup>10</sup> Intertextual narrative analysis compares the handling of a similar subject across various texts, identifying themes and characterizations; considered together, these themes may illuminate social and cultural attitudes and norms.<sup>11</sup> Narrative analysis focuses not on the story but on how the story is told—and, in this case, also on how the story is *not* told. It is critical to read silences and absences in gendered discourse because the implications and as-

sumptions within them may be powerful statements of hegemonic forces.<sup>12</sup> Media messages matter because they both reflect and form culture. Hall delineates how mass media create and reinforce ideologies<sup>13</sup> and Williams describes how mass media produce meaning and value, along with representations (and misrepresentations) of lived experience.<sup>14</sup> Lana Rakow contends that media don't carry messages about culture, media *are* culture, and that the role of popular media in disseminating patriarchal ideology must be recognized before social and cultural change can occur.<sup>15</sup> Media messages are the terrain upon which hegemonic values are worked out, expressed, and reinforced.

Scholarly exploration of media coverage of female killers is expanding. Studies of magazine coverage focus on domestic violence against women, and studies of female murderers have sampled only newspaper coverage. For this study, I used the Lexis Nexis and the EBSCO databases to search U.S. and Canadian magazines published between 1993–2013 for terms such as “Battered Woman Syndrome”, “Women Murderers” and “Domestic Violence.” The long length of time of the sample is a response to the rare coverage these women receive. Magazines, rather than newspapers, were chosen as texts because this study examines how the issue is characterized, as in the feature, service, and self-help articles that commonly appear in magazines, not how it is reported, as in the hard news crime and statistics reports of newspapers. Articles that did not address women attacking their attackers were culled out, and the remaining 23 articles were analyzed to consider how these women are characterized. Little is written in the popular press about violent women, and what is written about women murderers tends to be about serial killers rather than women who kill an abusive intimate partner. The sample of these articles may appear small. However, an earlier study of articles about domestic violence in general in a sample of ten years of ten popular magazines yielded 77 articles in men's magazines and 101 articles in women's, and only five of those articles were about violent women.<sup>16</sup> Future studies expanding into additional databases are warranted, and as domestic violence and battered woman syndrome receive more media coverage, the numbers of related stories in popular magazines may rise and broaden future studies.

## **Women Who Kill: Rare and Rarely Studied**

In criminological and sociological study, the issue of gender is generally sidelined and female deviance is marginalized. Heidensohn suggests that one rea-

son for this may be that female crime, in the legal system as well as in theoretical work, has been dealt with almost exclusively by male jurists, attorneys, and academics.<sup>17</sup> Farrell calls female serial killers an “elusive population to study” because they are less likely than men to have a criminal history, kill family rather than strangers, and use methods like smothering and poison.<sup>18</sup> However, other studies argue that women do not use poison more often than guns,<sup>19</sup> and find that most women kill with guns and knives.<sup>20</sup> Another challenge in analyzing female murderers is that women, relatively speaking, rarely kill. Studies of violence by females tend to be limited to small numbers of cases (fewer than 20) because there are small numbers of reported cases. A limited number of studies explore female serial killers.<sup>21</sup>

Women most often kill spouses or partners,<sup>22</sup> and these homicides are often preceded by years of abuse by that partner.<sup>23</sup> Female killers have typically been “violently victimized by their male consort both in prior episodes and in the immediate murder scene.”<sup>24</sup> A very high percentage—about 90% in most studies—of women in prison for murder were battered by their victims.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the most common homicide committed by a woman is of her intimate partner, and a typical precursor to these homicides is sustained abuse by that partner over a period of years. Battered woman syndrome (BWS) is a psychological theory developed in the late 1970s/early 1980s describing the mindset of women who kill their abusers.<sup>26</sup> BWS recognizes the abuser as the primary aggressor, and the reaction of an abused woman as a post-traumatic stress disorder-related response to an ongoing cycle of violence.<sup>27</sup> It recognizes domestic violence as gender violence, affecting many more women than men.<sup>28</sup> It is a controversial concept, in part because it provides an explanation for why women remain in abusive relationships: BWS identifies this behavior as a type of learned helplessness.<sup>29</sup>

All 50 states allow BWS to be introduced as a viable argument in murder trials, and it applies retroactively for prisoners convicted before 1992—they can try to prove they would have been acquitted if a history of abuse had been admitted as evidence in their trials.<sup>30</sup> The syndrome positions the woman killer as mentally ill. Some opponents argue that this allows women to get away with criminal behavior, and others argue that the syndrome defense overlooks the rational actor who has engaged in justifiable self-defense.<sup>31</sup> Her active defense of herself becomes obscured by the medical diagnosis, and she instead is viewed as a victim. “Having at last taken some action to defend herself against her attacker and having succeeded in overcoming him, the battered woman is

immediately cast as not having acted at all", argues Morrissey. "She effectively loses the very agency and self-determination she tried so hard to gain."<sup>32</sup>

## Media Coverage of Domestic Violence

Sociologist Nancy Berns made separate studies of women's<sup>33</sup> and men's<sup>34</sup> magazine coverage of domestic violence, and found that women were held responsible for the violence men do. She calls this "degendering the problem and gendering the blame."<sup>35</sup> The violence of men is repositioned as violence in general, with gender excised, but female victims are blamed for victim-like behaviors that are particularly attached to their gender. Ignoring the role of gender in the attacker while focusing on the role of gender in the victims repositions the issue of domestic violence as being a woman's private problem.<sup>36</sup> This allows the roles of gender and power to be overlooked in considering the social problem of domestic violence and "plays a central role in resisting any attempts to situate social problems within a patriarchal framework."<sup>37</sup>

A ten-year study of ten leading women's and men's magazines found that women's magazines hold women responsible for male violence and men's magazines sidestep male responsibility and treat violence against women with humor. Magazines blame women for choosing violent men, shame women for remaining in their homes with their children after violence, and address women as if they are passive victims. No magazines advised men to curb their anger or stop hitting women; the actions most often advocated against domestic violence was for women to choose different men, avoid adding stress to men's lives, or move far away and change their names.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, a study of 292 Florida newspaper articles published between 1995 and 2000 about murdered women found that victims were blamed directly or indirectly for their own murders; directly by describing the victim in negative terms, indirectly by describing the perpetrator sympathetically<sup>39</sup>

Direct tactics include using negative language to describe the victim highlighting the perpetrator's mental, physical, and emotional problems, discussing the couple's financial despair . . . and describing domestic violence in terms that assign equal blame to both the victim and perpetrator.<sup>40</sup>

Such blaming tactics are significant; scholars argue that the blaming of female victims by media may serve to excuse or even encourage male violence, and contribute to an environment in which men feel free to behave violently.<sup>41</sup>

In her analysis of media coverage of sexual violence, Jenny Kitzinger finds that the news media bias of covering events rather than issues helps create a sense that sexual violence is an inevitable occurrence, a regular event, rather than evidence of a larger social issue.<sup>42</sup> Fast-moving news cycles create (or suppose) short attention spans among editors and readers, discouraging in-depth, ongoing coverage of issues and revisiting important policy considerations.<sup>43</sup> Even when media include feminist viewpoints in coverage, they downplay or sidestep entirely the role social and cultural forces play in perpetuating patriarchy and allowing sexual violence to exist.<sup>44</sup>

A newspaper study of coverage from 1978 to 2002 found that battered women were “medicalized then criminalized . . . they were mad, then bad” and presented as being mentally unstable or particularly fragile.<sup>45</sup> When media characterizes battered women as being either unhinged or scheming, it titillates audiences and reinforces “belittling ideal types and social attitudes towards women and victims of domestic violence.”<sup>46</sup>

## Media Coverage of Women Murderers

In one of the only studies of media coverage of women who kill, Bakken and Farrington looked at newspaper coverage of 18 murder trials of women from 1870 to 1958.<sup>47</sup> They found that gender figured importantly in legal arguments and media coverage. Juries were sympathetic to women who could appear as a victim, and lawyers, judges, and reporters saw their work through the lens of the gender stereotypes of their time.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, the news media were identified as playing a significant role in shaping public opinion about battered women who kill their abusers, for sensationalizing women who kill, and for disproportionately bringing attention to the few women who kill as opposed to the higher numbers of men who kill their intimate partners.<sup>49</sup> Female murderers attract public interest and media coverage, perhaps, Morrissey argues, because murders committed by women are

generally more traumatic for hetero patriarchal societies than those of men. For the fear of women, of their power to generate life and to take it away, runs deep in male-dominated societies . . . The need to contain and limit the threat posed by such women is paramount in legal discourses, charged with interacting societies official response to these crimes, and in media discourses, responsible for communicating that reaction to the general public.<sup>50</sup>

## Magazine Coverage of Lady Killers

In part because women murderers are rare in society, coverage of women murderers in magazines is also rare. This study located 23 articles in 20 years about women being violent with intimate partners. Four articles each appeared in *Newsweek*, *National Review*, and *Maclean's*. Two articles each appeared in *Essence*, *People*, and *Men's Health*. One article each appeared in *Jet*, *Ebony*, *Marie Claire*, *Texas Monthly*, and *Alberta Report*. Twelve of these articles mention specific cases of 13 women who killed their abusers, six articles are about violent women in general or violent women who attacked their partners but did not kill them, and five articles discuss Battered Woman Syndrome. Across all of the articles, however, writers drew upon the same themes to explain women killers to their audiences. These magazines produced very similar narratives to explain: who female murderers are; what they do when they kill; and what motivates them to strike. Magazine reports on these women depicted the women's actions, character and motivations in particular and constrained ways. These reports employ conventional narratives and stereotypes about women and domestic violence, as well as normative femininity, to describe: who Lady Killers are; how they kill; and why Lady Killers fight back.

### Who Lady Killers Are

Women killers are characterized as soft and feminine, rather than violent and threatening. They and the murders they commit are described in sexualized terms. They are described as being terrified of their abusers and are interviewed once they are safely behind bars, having been punished for their crimes.

### Women Killers Are Frightened

Media coverage describes women killers as being terrified and feeling threatened. Women are not described as fearsome murderers who inspire fear, but rather as fearful victims.

"I was terrified", says a woman who shot her batterer. "I was afraid for my life."<sup>51</sup> The fear of the attacker is so strong, many articles argue, that even after a woman has killed her abusive partner, she still imagines him coming to kill her.<sup>52</sup>



## Women Killers Are Feminine

Women who shoot, stab, or run over their abusers are described in magazine articles as being hegemonically feminine and attractive. Women are characterized as being meek and weak, and much is made of their unimpressive physical size, particularly compared to that of their partners. Female murderers are not described as terrifying, frightening, or physically intimidating. Susan Wright stabbed her husband 193 times and then buried him in the backyard. *Texas Monthly* describes her as a “shy, suburban mother” and “a lovely young woman, still as polite and well-mannered as she was seven years ago.”<sup>53</sup> Her voice is described as “soft”, and she meets a prison visitor while “ducking her head shyly.” She wears “dark-red Covergirl lipstick” and “smelled nice”; she is described as “timid, almost apologetic” and “nervous”, and is the “Martha Stewart” of the prison.<sup>54</sup> Mary Winkler shot her minister husband, and is described as “America’s unlikeliest alleged killer” and “kindhearted.”<sup>55</sup> A woman who stabbed her husband is described as “a wispy 100 pounds”;<sup>56</sup> another is described as “a porcelain-skinned young woman.”<sup>57</sup>

## Women Killers—and Murders—are Sexualized

The years of abuse, the murder, and the trial are often couched in sexual terms. A prosecutor in a “tight-fitting” pantsuit “rose on her black high heels” to “straddle” a male colleague and re-enact the stabbing at the trial.<sup>58</sup> *Men’s Health* ran a special section on domestic violence called “Femme Fatales”,<sup>59</sup> and an earlier article on violent women with the line “signs your angel of death may have worn high heels.”<sup>60</sup> *Mclean’s* emphasizes one murderer’s “femme fatale qualities” and characterizes her as a “chain-smoking seductress with an icy approach.”<sup>61</sup>

Two articles in the 23 discuss domestic violence in the LGBT community, and one details a case in which a woman decapitated and dismembered her same-sex lover. Inequities in legal protections for same-sex couples are detailed, and an expert source is quoted saying that, when lesbians are fighting, it becomes difficult for law enforcement to determine who is the aggressor and who is the victim, and an altercation can be dismissed as a “cat fight” or “two women going at it.”<sup>62</sup>

## Women Killers Are behind Bars

All of the battered women who killed their abusers in this study were interviewed while they were incarcerated, save one—and she was freed on bond and awaiting trial. One was on Death Row. The articles use only convicted and imprisoned women as sources. The prison appears in several articles as a prominent feature, and reporters reference the visiting room, the cells, the appearance of the woman in her uniform or with her prison pallor.<sup>63</sup>

## How Lady Killers Kill

In media coverage, women who kill are characterized as being almost unaware of their actions. The murders are cast as accidents and a series of unwitting actions. The weapons of choice for women killers are guns and knives.

## Women Killers Don't Mean to Do It

Women who kill their attackers are described as not knowing what they were doing at the time of the murder, being “in a fog”, losing track of time, and believing their partner wasn't dead and would soon return to hurt them.<sup>64</sup> Murders are described as scenes of accidental actions: “I was sobbing and shaking uncontrollably...my vision was blurred...The gun just went off.”<sup>65</sup> A grown son describes the day his mother murdered his father: “He pointed a shotgun at her, but this time they wrestled with it and she shot him...I know it was an accident.”<sup>66</sup> A woman whose batterer had just raped her and then stepped behind the car to urinate was run over, but she is quoted in the article as saying, “I didn't meant to kill him. . . . The car was in the wrong gear. I swear it was. I backed up and hit something. Then I drove off to the police station. They found him dead in the woods.”<sup>67</sup> The narratives of these articles frame women killers as victims rather than murderers. The *Texas Monthly* story about Susan Wright argues that she was seen as a monster when she was really a victim.<sup>68</sup> The murder is rationalized with accounts of battered woman syndrome or other statements: “Wright clearly believed that she was committing a reasonable act to save herself and her children.”<sup>69</sup>

## Women Killers Shoot and Stab

Of the women who killed their attackers, seven used guns, four used knives, one used a scissor, and one used a car. Women who wounded but did not kill their attackers used guns. An article in *Newsweek* stating “women are just as likely as men to start a fight” suggests that “women are getting to the family gun first.”<sup>70</sup> Shootings are described as being “shot in the head,”<sup>71</sup> “she loaded a .22-calibre pistol, put it in her purse, and went for a drive . . . she shot him to death in the car,”<sup>72</sup> “she shot him point-blank in the chest with [his] .357 Magnum,”<sup>73</sup> “[she] shot [him] twice, once from close range,”<sup>74</sup> “the shotgun slaying of her minister husband,”<sup>75</sup> and “a bullet exploded through the window and hit him.”<sup>76</sup> A woman who stabbed her husband to death “attacked with such rage that she bent one knife and broke the blade of another”, a *Men’s Health* writer recounts.<sup>77</sup> Articles include all the violent details—the weapons, the attack, the blood: Jeffrey Wright’s “nude body” was “partially visible in his grave because the family dog had dug him up”, and neckties and a robe sash were tied around his limbs;<sup>78</sup> “In total, she used four knives to inflict 22 wounds, mainly in the abdomen, back, and head. Unfortunately, she missed his vital organs, and he slowly bled to death.”<sup>79</sup>

## Why Lady Killers Fight Back

Media coverage of women killers focuses on why women are moved to pull the trigger—why women act violently. Often, articles cite a history of past abuse at the hands of their partner and/or explain battered woman syndrome and detail the characteristics of women who have been abused over time.

### Past Abuse

Accounts of female murderers of intimate partners often include vivid details of the abuse her partner inflicted on her prior to the murder. The batterer’s physical power and cruelty is emphasized. Paragraphs are spent detailing the woman’s injuries, bruises, hospital visits, fear of her partner, sexual abuse, rape, and unfruitful encounters with the law.<sup>80</sup> Weapons and violent fights are described, as in *Jet*: “He beat her repeatedly, struck her with a baseball bat, and threw dishes at her.”<sup>81</sup> Public scenes and embarrassment at the hands of the batterer are described, as in *Marie Claire*: “He hissed that we had to leave . . . he back-handed me across the face.”<sup>82</sup> A lengthy *Texas Monthly* article about

a woman who stabbed her husband and buried him in the backyard spends almost as many words describing the beatings and abuse she endured before she murdered him. Her husband was "a sadistic, drug-abusing brute who'd belittled and controlled her, kicked and punched her when she didn't do what he wanted, and sexually assaulted her whenever he felt like it", throwing her against the car window and dashboard.<sup>83</sup> Dangerous and alarming altercations are recounted with evocative and almost voyeuristic language, physical injuries are ticked off in long lists, and attacks are described dramatically: "yanking me by the arm . . . he pointed the gun right at my face";<sup>84</sup> "[her] black eyes, broken nose and shattered finger";<sup>85</sup> "Black eyes. Broken bones. Battered psyches."<sup>86</sup>

### The Battered Woman Syndrome

Battered women are characterized in these articles as being helpless, unaware of other options, not in control of their lives, victimized, and unable to imagine what else to do—legal avenues have been at least partially explored, but generally do not significantly interrupt the abuse. Sometimes, she is described as loving her partner; sometimes, she is described as hating him. Always, she is terrified of him and imagines him as a nearly omnipotent and omniscient figure. These characterizations fit into common beliefs and stereotypes about battered women. The *Texas Monthly* article about the stabbing and backyard burial of Jeffrey Wright is one example:

A growing body of evidence suggests that at least some women in such situations become practically frozen with fear. . . . Terrified about further angering their husbands, they often don't tell anyone about what they are enduring, including members of their own family, and they wait until bruises have cleared to get a medical checkup. But as the abuse continues, the women become more and more distraught. In rare instances, something happens to a woman that is so frightening—perhaps she or one of her children receives a particularly brutal beating—that she suddenly lashes out, convinced that her only logical option is to kill her abuser.<sup>87</sup>

This is a definition of battered woman syndrome. The syndrome is the topic in four skeptical articles in the *National Review* that argue against the legality of the syndrome being used in criminal defense.<sup>88</sup> The magazine presents a consistent position over the 14 years spanning these four articles that battered women being both victim and killer is dissonant: "Killing one's abuser seems quite inconsistent with the theory of learning helplessness . . . the

position that so many judges and legislators have taken is scientifically suspect, philosophically debatable, and legally unnecessary."<sup>89</sup> The four articles argue that women should "just leave" and place responsibility on the victim of abuse. Parker writes, "Without blaming the victim . . . everyone has to take responsibility for his or her role in the dynamic that leads to violence"<sup>90</sup> and the four articles hold women accountable—as do other articles in this sample. The 2008 article argues that "women initiate violence as often as men", and the 1994 article claims that "battered women get away with murder":<sup>91</sup>

Because of repeated abuse, the theory goes, the battered woman has low self-esteem. Depressed and unmotivated, she is unable to leave her husband. She comes to believe that the only way of extricating herself is to maim or kill him. Even though she is not in immediate danger at the time she strikes back (if she were, she could plead self-defense), promoters of battered-woman syndrome argue that she should be treated leniently.<sup>92</sup>

In a *Newsweek* essay in this sample, Rush Limbaugh takes up the argument against accepting the battered woman syndrome as a defense.

Self-defense? We're talking about a man sleeping in his own bed. Until recently, the law on self-defense has been clear: if someone attacks you, you have the right to use force to protect yourself. You do not have the right to kill or maim someone you claim assaulted you an hour ago. That's not self-defense. That's revenge.<sup>93</sup>

## What Magazine Coverage of Lady Killers Signals

Women who defend themselves are regarded as anomalies and are quickly repositioned into feminine, sexualized objects who remain baffled by their own actions and are now safely behind bars. Self-defense against misogynist violence appears to be a difficult case to make to a judge or jury, even when that violence has been long-term, extreme, and clearly documented, and even when other avenues to resolving that violence have proven ineffective.

Consider the case of Marissa Alexander, sentenced in 2012 to twenty years in prison for firing what she called a "warning shot" at her estranged husband, against whom she had a restraining order and who was, at the time, threatening to kill her.<sup>94</sup> Though Florida has a "stand your ground" law that was evoked for George Zimmerman, who killed Trayvon Martin, a circuit court judge found Alexander's actions "inconsistent with a person who is in genuine fear for his or her life"<sup>95</sup>—though her husband was saying "Bitch, I'll

kill you”, and had just attempted to strangle her.<sup>96</sup> The inconsistent application of the law sparked widespread criticism, and feminist groups organized to fund her defense and get her freed. In March 2014, a planned retrial threatened to extend Alexander’s sentence to 60 years, rearranging her sentence of three counts of aggravated assault (firing toward her husband and his two sons) from being concurrently to being consecutively served.<sup>97</sup> In November 2014, Alexander accepted a plea deal to serve three years. Women who fight back are severely penalized—Alexander was threatened with a 60-year sentence for a shot that hit no one—and their arguments of self-defense are questioned and often considered unjustified.

### **The Threat of the Transgressive Female Is Neutralized**

Women who kill are characterized in this magazine coverage as being docile, baffled, guiltless, and victimized previous to the murder. The murder often occurs, articles recount, while she was in an altered state of a lack of awareness of her actions. Previous abuse at the hands of her intimate partner is detailed, along with years of futile attempts at counseling, restraining orders, separation, and sometimes divorce. Nothing works and she feels helpless, until the day or night when she murders him. Women who kill are described as being girlish, attractive, soft-spoken, pleasant—inhabiting the characteristics of hegemonic femininity and, in some cases, motherhood. Still, she is presented as being safely behind bars, appropriately disciplined for having transgressed. Such media representation of murderers appears uniquely female; these are not the media representations at work in descriptions of male serial killers and male murderers.

The ubiquity of and heavy emphasis on the abuse from the batterer prior to the murder position the woman who kills as victim, not criminal. These stories create empathy and concern in the audience and may help perpetuate common conceptions of battered women as hapless and helpless. These narratives may also help position the battered woman syndrome as a reasonable legal defense and explanation for her actions, but that “reasonableness” hinges on accepting the murderer as temporarily unstable and acting without rationale or agency. Describing the fear of the battered women who kill additionally positions the killer in these ways. The history of abuse and the accounts of terrified victims may buttress claims of self-defense. Opponents of the battered woman syndrome defense argue that killing after the attack is revenge, overlooking the possibility that it may be strategic. A victim who is

smaller and weaker than a batterer might strategically wait until the abuser is unsuspecting, asleep, or drunk and then take action. Fighting back at the wrong moment may cost her life.

Descriptions of women murderers as being feminine, pretty, and unthreatening may serve to reposition the transgressive female back into acceptable social roles. She becomes the “Martha Stewart of the prison”, she is concerned about her children, she applies lipstick, she appears shy. Described in these ways, the woman who kills becomes the woman next door—if the woman next door is timid and subservient. Her violence is minimized and dismissed, and her femininity is privileged and focused on as her most enduring, recognizable, and valued characteristics. By making murderers demure, it minimizes their threat. Her resistance and agency in fighting back is erased as her “ladylike” qualities are foregrounded. The aberrant female is brought back into the fold of respectable and predictable female subservient behavior. She erred once, but now she is just like anyone else’s mom, wife, mother. Focusing on the small size of women and expressing surprise that a tiny, weak woman could hurt a big, strong man may work to reinforce the idea that men are essentially unthreatened by women, and that women cannot pose a legitimate physical threat to men.

The narrative that women kill accidentally may work to resolve the dissonance between the social imagining of a woman being nurturing, loving, sexually available, and compliant with the reality that she picked up a gun and shot her man. If the killing is accidental, unplanned, a surprise even to her—if she didn’t mean to do it—then her agency as a victim who might turn on her attacker is effectively erased. She is not a threat; she barely realized what she was doing.

### **The Transgressive Female Is Sexualized**

These texts relate the ways women kill with a certain fascination. Writers appear to find it remarkable that women pick up guns and shoot them, an attitude of surprise that is not commonly expressed in crime news about male perpetrators. However, studies and these texts reveal that a woman’s weapon of choice is the one that fires bullets. For a murderer who might easily be physically overpowered by her victim, the choice of a weapon that is effective regardless of the upper body strength of its user does not seem surprising or odd.

The use of imprisoned women as sources in these texts may serve as a sort of moral to the story. Readers are encouraged to empathize with the victim of abuse, to feel some compassion for her plight, and to almost understand her

aberrant choices, but in the end, she pays for her crime and is removed from society and reverts to a more acceptable version of femininity. She becomes penitent, regretful, and truly subordinate.

The sexual objectification of murderers and of the murders themselves is striking. The audience is invited to gaze on the abused and broken female bodies as the years of battering are recounted. Sexualizing women killers moves them out of the position of predator and back into position as the object of male attention. It may work to reinscribe the idea that women exist for men to treat as they like, a message that may be particularly significant when applied to women who kill men.

### **Domestic Violence Myths Are Reified**

Among the myths about domestic violence that media coverage perpetuates is the suggestion that battered women should simply divorce or leave their abusers, thereby solving the problem. This dangerously overlooks or ignores statistical information about intimate partner violence. The most likely time for a partner to kill a woman is when she leaves him. If she leaves, and leaves for another partner, her risk is five times increased of being killed.<sup>98</sup>

### **Missing from Lady Killer Media Coverage**

In analyzing gender and other matters of representation in media, such as representation of race or sexuality, it can be helpful to consider what Stuart Hall called the "silences." Absences in representation can reveal prevailing cultural attitudes and assumptions. Looking for absences can sometimes create "aha!" moments when what has previously been unseen becomes visible. What is missing from these accounts? What is not present in these articles? What is absent?

There are no accounts of women who characterize their choice to kill as a desperate, tragic, regrettable, but seemingly necessary way to protect themselves and their children. There are no accounts of women who take responsibility for their actions and who claim their own agency. No articles hold law enforcement or the legal system accountable for the abuse or the murder.

No narratives resist popular notions of battered women being weak, victimized, and helpless. No narratives hold men responsible for stopping the abuse—women are held responsible for all legal and social solutions to the problem, including leaving. In a way, the battered woman syndrome defense admits that existing social systems are not adequate in interrupting and pre-



venting domestic violence; recognition of the syndrome is a kind of acceptance that law enforcement and legal measures will let women down and put them at risk. Articles ask why she tolerates his abuse but no articles ask why the legal system, the community, and the media tolerate it.

There are no accounts of concerned and caring men, in or outside legal systems, who speak or work against the abuse of other men, or who attempt to protect women and children. Men who care about this issue are rendered invisible in the media.

There are no narratives of powerful, accomplished, capable women who find themselves battered or find themselves prepared to kill a man. This absence may help perpetuate the belief that only weak women are abused, therefore, being abused is the fault of the woman.

There are no narratives about the role of patriarchy in creating a culture that values male violence and positions women as subservient beings to or even possessions of men. There are no narratives that acknowledge the contributions of social and cultural structures, religion, education, media—and above all, gender—to the problem of domestic violence. Rachel Jewkes writes that domestic violence is a “product of gender inequality and the lesser status of women compared to men”,<sup>99</sup> yet this perspective is unaddressed in these media texts.

By presenting a battered woman’s plight as inescapable and domestic violence as too complex a problem for society to solve, media assist in placing responsibility on the woman. Women are held accountable for the violence done to them, but they are also blamed if they do not fight back—“why doesn’t she leave?”—and blamed if they do.

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