The violence of women: suppressions and narratives

Coline Cardi and Geneviève Pruvost
From mythical amazons to the Roman viragos, from Nikita to Lara Croft, from Manga heroines to witches, there have been many violent females populating the imaginary worlds found in the products of media and culture. Heroic or monstrous, sometimes referred to as the instigators of male violence, they provoke excitement, fascination and repulsion. However, until recently in France, the violence of women has remained a little-explored question within the humanities and social sciences, particularly within the sociology of deviance and penal institutions. We feel reluctant to approach the subject, reproducing at the analytical level (...) the reluctance to approach the female body, unless it is maternal (Perrot, 2002, 125). This formulation by Michelle Perrot about violence committed against women actually applies equally to violence committed by women, as though the female body, even in the research context, is still associated with the maternal and therefore with care (Paperman, Laugier, 2006), with concern and nurturing. Violent women thus help to blur boundaries, creating a social disorder that is not just historically or clinically exceptional. There is a double challenge. It not only involves an attack on an idea – violence – defined by anthropologists and philosophers as a kind of unthinkable residue, irrational, intolerable, defying categories of analyses (Lenclud, Claverie, Jamin, 1984; Lavergne, Perdoncin, 2010), but it is also necessary to deny it in women – even while the order of the sexes and genders and beyond that, the social order, consider violence to be an attribute of the virile male.

Thus, this special edition of Penal Field requires that we question such an apparently impossible combination. Its impossibility is only apparent: if violence is a domain reserved for men, it is not yet something they can monopolize. Yes, women are violent in spite of their gentle nature, something asserted ironically by Arlette Farge and Cécile Dauphin (Dauphin, Farge, 1997, 12) in their pioneering work, Of Violence and Women. Undeniably in the statistical minority, female violence is a constant phenomenon. And this is as true today as it was in the past, and in very different geographical areas. In the same way that Durkheim saw suicide or crime as being far from pathological, but instead,
a regular phenomena worthy of sociological investigation, we would like to mobilize the resources of social science in studying the female aptitude for violence.

Female violence can be analyzed from different perspectives. For this issue, we have chosen to focus on the gender dimension of the social control of violence, formalized in legal institutions, not limiting ourselves to penal institutions (disciplinary, judicial, para-criminal and clinical institutions), which act both to reveal and obscure female violence. How, where, and through which modalities do women actually commit acts of violence? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to focus on professional practices, the functioning of regulatory institutions, but also to examine the relationship between knowledge and power (Foucault, 1975) in its sexual dimension. How do secular and scholarly categories contribute to gender differentiation and ascribe to female violence the character of something unnatural or private? It involves continuing the project begun by others, and explaining how societies, live, think about and imagine female violence (Dauphin, Farge, 1997, 11) as well as revealing the sexual dimension contained within social order and control, in order to evaluate, ultimately, the social and political issues which the recognition of this female violence entails.

This recognition does not relativize the violence committed against women; neither does it suggest a symmetry between violence committed by and against women. Also, to say that women are beings with a special aptitude for violence does not define men as victims of overpowering women, as is claimed by masculinist and anti-feminist discourse. On the other hand, this complicates the flow of interactions and the assigning of roles.

1. The Euphemization of the Phenomenon

Female violence appears in a presence/absence mode. Hypertrophied, ultravisible, it is nevertheless hidden, even denied – the two processes, we will see, often occurring together. How can we explain this invisibility, which relates as much to the social world as to scientific research?

1.1 The Definition of Violence: a slippery subject

This invisibilization relates to the violence itself. When analyzing violence, it is conventional to remember the extent to which the term remains both difficult to define and difficult to describe. To be persuaded of this, it’s enough to immerse oneself in the various codes (penal, civil, criminal procedure). In the penal context, violence is not seen as a free-standing offence, such as theft, rape, assault and battery. It is seen mainly as an aggravating circumstance which qualifies an offence, as for example, in a theft with violence or in the civil code where violence can breach a contract. It is in such circumstances that violence does or does not develop significance (the “threat of violence”). In the codes, the term “violence” is most often used in the plural and is defined by default within a hierarchy of behaviors and offences: crimes and beatings, deceit, intimidation, violence, torture and barbarous acts. It is a type of portmanteau word that allows people in the police and judiciary network to cover a wide range of offences and activities by calling them “violent”, without there having been a repertoire of actions and gestures a priori consisting of these forms of violence. It is kind of an empty category, left to the discretion of legislators, along with another concept, that of “danger” (Article 375 of the Civil Code). This requires great caution regarding a precise definition of
something that we can see is likely to remain vague, including that which relates to the
law. This suggests, in terms of research, that one question the qualifications of offences
and actions.

Indeed, this poses a major methodological problem in the study of violence: must we
concern ourselves only with the labelling processes related to what the parties involved
consider violent and non-violent, knowing that thresholds for the tolerance of violence
differ from one social group to another, from one era to another, from one situation to
another? Is it social science researchers who decide that this event or that fact is a violent
one – and so risk defining violence in very broad terms? Regarding the study of women,
efforts at requalification and translation are very important because one must not only
highlight the most spectacular acts of female violence, but also unearth situations of
female violence, denied as such, or euphemized, thus necessitating the decoding of
archives. In all cases, the designation of violence, whether emanating from people being
studied, or from scientific discourse producing its own categories, is not neutral, and this
discourse requires making a selection having effects that are performance-related.

1.2 The feminist taboo regarding female violence

The difficulty in reporting on violence, on both the empirical and theoretical levels, is
reinforced by a process which renders women invisible – these famous “silent ones of
History” (Perrot, 1998). As shown in the book edited by Frédéric Malandain Chauvaud and
Gilles (2009), women who went to court in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were in
a double bind: “impossible victims” and “impossible perpetrators”, they struggled to
promote the idea that the violence they suffered but also the violence they inflicted were
neither pathological nor exceptional. These two intertwined operations reflect the
“marginal” position of women.

Indeed, social organization rests upon a material and symbolic direction of a bipolarity
which distributes tasks and stereotypes, setting into opposition nature/culture, private
space/public space, life-giving/death-dealing, strength/weakness, virility/femininity,
malesex/femalesex (Ortner, 1998; Héritier, 1996). This sexually based division of roles, of
stereotypes and symbols, forces women to act as agents for the pacification of customs
rather than as warriors – or more precisely, to be denied the most sophisticated weapons.
This is the principle uncovered by anthropologist Paola Tabet, who investigated the rules
regarding the distribution of tools and found a technological gap between the sexes
(Tabet, 1979, 10). It goes without saying that these uses decline in quite a variable manner
and that the systems of distribution, while being strongly gender-related, do allow for
exceptions. There are indeed women with the heart of a man (Héritier, 1996), who sow
disorder and displace existing norms, to the point of eroding the very foundations of the
principle of the male monopoly of weapons (Pruvost, 2008).

From chronological point of view, the scientific study of the appropriation by women of
the power to commit violence occurred after violence had been committed against
women, and for strategic purposes. Gender studies, related to the movement for the
liberation of women, conformed to the logic of the political urgency of changing laws and
practices: it was imperative to make visible the structural, material and physical
oppression imprinted upon the bodies of women. The identification of specific acts
experienced by women is a major recognition of the phenomenon as a social act (Jaspard
et al., 2003) because in this area, it is possible to move three steps forward and two steps back.
(Chetcuti et al., 2007). It was crucial for violence against women to become a public issue (Gusfield, 2009). They had from that point entered onto the political and legislative agenda. The table of contents of the most recent penal code shows a separate entry reserved for acts of violence against women. (see Decree no.©2010-671 of June 18, 2010 - art. 2). The phenomenon had now become gendered: women, as such, were designated as victims of violence in the civil, criminal procedure and criminal codes.

Thus, as we have seen, even though the French codes remain unclear regarding the characterization of violent acts as well as the perpetrators of these acts, the contours of the potential victims of these acts, on the other hand, are more precise. The systematic survey of the uses of the term “violence” in the codes reveals that women and minors are the two main categories of victims associated with the term “violence”. Its inclusion within the law reflects the broader paradigmatic association between the category “woman” and the category “victim”, but also between “woman” and “non-violence”.

In such a context, highlighting the heterogeneity of women (and especially the participation of women in violence) is politically dangerous and could lead, in terms of political rationality, to a form of essentialization (Butler, 2005). In fact, rare are the feminists like Marie-Jo Dhavernas, who, during the time of the Movement for the Liberation of Women, have highlighted the implicit participation of feminists in the myth of feminine non-violence.

It seems to me that the avoidance of the problem by the Movement (for the Liberation of Women) is to a large extent, an implicit one, having confused tendencies which, on behalf of the critique of violence, endorse the myth of female non-violence (whether that comes from biology, the unconscious, or culture, being of little consequence in this case). We have heard it said, outside of the movement but also sometimes within it, that “the life-giving gender cannot want to give death”, which cheapens the ambivalent nature of love (especially maternal or paternal) and forgets that to give life is also, by definition, to give death because if there is absolute death, there is no life that does not contain death. [...] Furthermore, the fact that women can have a connection to violence, other than as a victim, often appears to be sacrilegious [...], it violates the image of the gentle female (and worse, of the Good Mother) and upsets the dichotomized order of society (Dhavernas, 1981).

But the point of view of Marie-Jo Dhavernas remains as isolated within the MLF (movement for the liberation of women) as within the academic context. Before discovering a scientific interest in female violence, gender studies had followed a militant agenda by first focusing on violence committed against women as well as on male domination. The work conducted by A. Farge and C. Dauphin, though preceded by historical research monographs, was the first that dared to combine the study of violence against women and violence committed by women. The title of the work (Of Violence and Women, 1997) reflects this dual ambition. This project was not, however, without its problems. Here is how the anthropologist, Marie-Élisabeth Handman, recalls the collaborative research project that was the source of the book:

I recall it taking me a year and a half to decide on feminist historians, holding the seminar at the EHESS, where some of them had participated in the work directed by G. Duby and M. Perrot, History of Women [...], the work relating to female violence. They feared that this would once again be stigmatized; yet it seems necessary to say that women are no less violent than men; simply that the causes of their violence and the forms which it assumes are usually different from those of men and that the exercise of their violence falls within the margins left to them by men (Handman, 2003, 73).
In fact, at its release, the work was not approved by the historical community, and neither more broadly by the social sciences.

On a different subject, the national media, it is interesting to note the reception given to the socio-demographic study by France-Line Mary on women and penal justice (1996a and b). In the months that followed the publication of its results, several newspaper articles had concluded that there was “a penal justice that went easier on women” and condemned this phenomenon. The writer relates that after the media publicized his work (sometimes erroneously, but in any case, caricatured), some (female) researchers criticized him for tainting the cause of women.

The feminism of the State, both deriving from and criticized by the Women’s Liberation Movement, at first glance seems to occupy a position of overhang in relation to feminist debates on the non-violentness of women. The different secretaries and Ministers for Women, for the rights of “Woman” then “Women” settled by asking for professional equality for men and women as a theoretical right of equality for all professional bodies (Lévy, 1988; Bride Stetson, Mazur, 1995): the professions of arms do not escape the rule requiring the feminization of male professions, especially since one of them is part of the public service. Thus, during the 1970s and 1980s, state feminism found itself juggling two priorities: on the one hand, the feminization of the army, the penal administration and the customs service and on the other hand, the fight against violence aimed at women. After achieving feminization at all levels and the lifting of discriminatory quotas for women in trades that had negotiated a special regime, the State feminists seem uninterested in persisting inequalities (Pruvost, 2008). The slowness of the feminization processes in these professions of arms is, however, representative of the difficulty of removing these male monopolies. The permanence of customs which block or limit the access of women to units most heavily armed with sophisticated weapons and most exposed to violence also reflects the persistence of sexual stereotypes and transgression which is the officialization of the presence of women in these sectors. It is implicit that the women recruited into the law and order professions must remain part of a minority (Pruvost, 2007). The equality sought by State feminism is more formal than real.

Thus, we can say that female violence is something embarrassing to the feminist movement, in both activist and scientific terms. It must be said that recognition of the phenomenon involves high risk: for women to claim to be on the side of non-violence increases the prohibition against them claiming access to violence as a legitimate resource, and this accentuates their political marginality to the detriment of other dominant groups (the colonized, for example), for whom the resource of violence is legitimate, which is also playing the game of essentialism which places women on the side of a timeless and intangible pacifism. But at the same time, to recognize violence by women as possible and desirable, is to postulate that access to violence is social progress, which validates the idea of women aligning themselves with male stereotypes, and not the other way around; and defines as a given, the indissolubility of citizenship and violence, and thus renounce the utopia of non-violence. This means that the discomfort caused by this double-bind is far from dissipated.

1.3 The under-representation of female acts of violence

To claim, however, that militant and academic feminism is the main obstacle to the emergence of female violence as a subject of study would be partial and erroneous.
violent women have long been excluded from the scope of research, this is due mainly to
the inability of the scientific world, particularly in France, to give legitimacy to gender
studies. In considering this process of concealment, we must take into account the small
number of female acts of violence. This rareness needs to be questioned by examining the
blinding effect produced by the statistical evidence: at all stages of the criminal process,
women, whatever their age, are a clear minority, thus validating the sexual stereotypes
that violence is a male preserve. Today in France, women represent 16% of people
questioned by the police and gendarmerie, 9% of people brought to justice and 3.4% of
people incarcerated. This asymmetry between the sexes, although it reflects the sexual
dimension of social control and regulation, has rarely been studied in France, and female
violence (its treatment as well as its actualization) has been hidden - whereas other works
were able to question the perception and the modes of the punishment of violence (of
men) (Mucchielli, 2007). This is also a restrictive interpretation of the idea of social
control, reduced to a penal reaction (Cardi, 2008, 2007a and b; Laberge, 1992). By basically
examining the male experience of deviance, the studies on “social reaction” have most
often focused on carceral and penal issues. And conversely: by considering only these
areas, the researchers have helped push aside the issue of female deviance.

To do work related to female violence thus involves acquiring methodological tools to
help understand the phenomenon. A critical analysis of sources and examples of the
labeling of violence and non-violence is needed. It is first necessary to recall the under-
reporting of these acts of violence by the authorities in charge of social control who are
empowered to record this type of act (police, justice, social work, prison) and then show
that the invisibilization is maintained by a supervision of women that is different from
that relating to men, under other labels, thus maintaining an asymmetry between the
sexuals (Cardi, 2008).

However, this current alternative census of female violence does not establish a
numerical parity. The asymmetry remains. How to describe it? Must we henceforth see
female violence in terms of equality/inequality, of delay/recovery, of the phenomenon of
minor/major? Such a vocabulary presupposes a social horizon in which violence would be
sexually undifferentiated. A dreaded spectre which results de facto from the removal of
this “dirty” object, due to the fear of the political misuse of scientific research pointing to
the feminization of groups making claims to the use of violence.

In any case, when thinking about female violence, we must not only be interested in the
sole participation of women in listed forms of violence, but also focus on more subtle
forms, more microscopic forms of violence (Handman, 1995) – needing here to highlight
the variety of forms of violence adopted by women. In this sense, the material and
cognitive “gap” between men and women in the use of weapons (Tabet, 1979), does not
mean they don’t make use of the objects at their disposal. With too much emphasis on the
differences in access to tools and the most sophisticated weapons, one can lose sight of
the fact that violence can take other paths.

So, to understand female violence, as in understanding the social control that is reserved
for them, it is important to not limit ourselves to areas with the most visible forms of
violence, such as wars, monopolies of legitimized violence or penal institutions that
sanction the most visible forms of violence (Cardi, 2008). To claim that women are less
violent because there are fewer of them in prison is inadequate. It would be better to
reverse the question and to ask: if the violent women are not in prison, where are they? It
is then necessary to look at the social welfare aspect here, to the extent that female
violence can be found even within institutions of care. This leads one to revisit those places that seem to guarantee gentle forms of socialization and to highlight the violence that may result from certain forms of social protection (Cardi, 2008). It is thus necessary to re-examine the borders between the public and the private, which are quite often the bases for typologies of violence: must violence from the private sphere be depoliticized to such an extent?

If we are studying female violence, we must, above all, find new sources, re-examine the archives, change our perspective to transform the invisible into the visible; it is also a matter of working on the reverse of this process of concealment.

2. The typical narrative: between reduction and expansion in the domain of struggle

One way to preserve the distinction between the sexes, since this is one of the sources of the invisibilization of violent females by institutions of social control, might be to reverse the focus on a few spectacular cases, by associating female violence with faces, significantly, having a first name, a family name which would be specified, and a repertoire of actions that are typically female: without revealing the variety of classifications which traverse times and social worlds, it would suffice to mention infanticide, crimes of passion, poisoning, abortion. These crimes would comprise the domain reserved to women. Because they are connected to the domestic and conjugal contexts, they do not violate gender stereotypes.

In terms of political violence, women should rather be seen as a more or less extra force, hunger rioters protesting against the high cost of living or as bereaved mothers and wives demonstrating against the tyranny of a power that incarcerates and kills “their” men. These people also correspond to the sexual division of labor that confers upon women the role of nurturers and protectors, and in this sense, they do not disrupt the order of the sexes. There is another categorization that allows one to avoid any confusion between sex roles: with boys-violations of public order and fighting; with girls-violence turned inward, with suicide attempts, anorexia, hysteria. These classifications reflect the state of gender relations, of what is tolerable in terms of women’s violence at a given time. Taken alone, each interpretation brings about a reduction in the apprehension of the diversity of women and the causes of female violence.

Our project here is to propose a census of typical narratives which span the social world (including scientific discourse) and which would allow us to gain an understanding of the emergence of female violence. We have counted eight, beginning with the specific case of non-narrative, which Goffman labeled “outside the frame” (Goffman, 1974) and which could lead to some unthinkable events such as female violence which were not recognized as events as they were occurring.

The second narrative that we have noted suggests the opposite of female violence and suggests a biological interpretation of the phenomenon, connected to the female “nature”. Invoked to attack or defend, female violence is explained either by the excessive and impulsive nature that is inherent to women or to some women that have been demonized, or by the converse argument of denaturalization: women who are gentle by nature could be corrupted by the violence that here might be a symptom of a lack or an excess of femininity, in short, of a disordered nature. It is thus that criminologists,
especially in the 19th century, interpreted female criminality as a “bad mother” suggesting not just a difference in nature between men and women, but also between criminal women and “normal” ones. For Cesare Lombroso (1896) for example, if women are, by nature, more cruel and immoral than men, their “moral insanity” would be partially moderated by the modesty and maternal instinct inherent in them – something which would be apparent from their minimal participation in criminality and their greater sense of religiosity. If, despite so many obstacles, a woman commits crimes, it is a proof that her perversity is enormous because she has succeeded in knocking down all impediments (Lambroso, 1896, 361). Most female criminals would thus be so “occasionally” or “in a passion”. For such women, modesty and the maternal instinct persist: they commit the act because of poverty or under the influence of a man. According to the two Italian criminologists, there are, however, signs of a certain virility. For example, the opportunistic criminals have a taste for weapons, a character that is proud, energetic and determined, they may have political passions and a strong tendency towards and take almost a pleasure in dressing as a man (Lombroso, 1896, 361). The “born-criminals” or the “born-prostitutes” are, according to them, distorted women: they simultaneously display signs of hypertrophied femininity (for example, sophisticated cruelty for revenge, extra sensitivity in the born-prostitute) and some attributes of masculinity, when they are associated with “primitive” (in relation to “born-criminals” and their “exaggerated” sexuality, one can read: This exaggerated eroticism, abnormal for the average woman, becomes for many the point of departure for their vices and crimes; and contributes to the creation of anti-social beings, seeking only to satisfy their violent desires, as lustful barbarians in whom civilization and the need have not yet disciplined sexuality (Lombroso, 1896, 361). This type of biologizing explanation has been widely questioned by criminologists themselves. However, some relatively new studies, especially those dealing with female criminality and violence, establish correlations between precociousness (in menstruation) and the propensity to commit crimes.

28 A third type of narrative is one that psychologizes female violence while also individualizing and privatizing it. In this case, we either ascribe the violence to a specific feminine psychology, or we ascribe it to a purely familial context – violence is then seen as a symptom of a malaise that is profoundly personal. In this case, it is less a matter of violence than of “marginality” or of “psychological symptom” – violence being seen as primarily a relationship with the self before it is a relationship with others and if women are seen as dangerous, it is, above all, to themselves (Cardi, 2008). This type of interpretation leads to the invisibilization of female violence that we referred to earlier. In prison, for example, the suicides and auto-mutilations of prisoners are never considered to be modes of resistance to the prison order. Within the juvenile justice system, the violent acts of criminalized girls are interpreted through the categories of psychology and help girls to disappear from judicial criminal statistics.

29 The culturalist interpretation offers a fourth type of narrative on the violence of women, seeing it as an idiosyncrasy within a group having its own rituals and culture. This interpretation is often based on an ethnocentric view which aims to degrade another social group, one deemed inferior, by qualifying as violent an exogenic phenomenon, which is not always perceived as such based on the groups studied. Within this type of interpretation, we can integrate the 19th century’s “popular female rebel” as well as the male worker, who were seen as less civilized, less educated and thus dangerous as a class in the eyes of the upper classes (Perrot, 1979; Scott, 1990). In the same way, female black
slaves were caricatured as brutal, masculine women and monstrous mothers, in order to establish by comparison, the supremacy of white women, the mothers of a superior race (Dorlin, 2006).

30 A fifth type of narrative thinks about female violence as being within the framework of male domination. This involves a violence that is subordinated to the violence of men who are regarded as the true armed force of violence or the most dangerous, while women are less harmful or would use weapons of the weak. Within this framework of analysis, women sometimes lose their status as a violent subject. They are disempowered, and even shift from the status of minor tormentor to that of victim. Sometimes it’s the opposite, they adopt the role of the manipulator who caused the original violence. This is, then, a delegated violence, not an autonomous one. In all cases, the women are completely unwilling to accept the status of subject, they claim complete possession and mastery of the means and ends of their actions.

31 The sixth type of narrative results from the preceding: the violence of women is seen as a political act, but as an exception which confirms the rule, possibly because the case is isolated, or because it involves a group that is very much a minority, or because access to violence is provisional, during times of crisis. The participation of women in acts of violence is thus either deemed heroic so as to celebrate exemplary figures who rise above their sex, or is held up as an index of the dissolution of the social order, as has been said about the time of the French Revolution (Godineau, 1996) or even today about the delinquency of girls, when we publicize their cruelty in order to support a security discourse that promotes a return to social order. The return to order is thus by way of a return to the sexual order. Thus are fighting women commonly treated, as parentheses, as enclaves within male territories, for the most part subject to the re-creation of a violent sexual division of labor. This conception, which could be characterized as carnivalesque (Bakhtine, 1965) tends ultimately to transform these transgressions into non-events, because they do not pull the rest of women into their wake. On behalf of the universality of male domination, all those for whom this experience would otherwise open a breach would instead be cast aside.

32 The seventh narrative, that the access of women to the power of violence might be seen as the tangible sign of the emancipation of women and of a possible undifferentiation. The access of all women (and not just some exceptions) to legal and illegal violence might, at a minimum, be interpreted as the appropriation of a power that confers a complete citizenship, from the point of view of the strict equality of the sexes (Pruvost, 2008). This phenomenon, at a maximum, could, in some cases, facilitate the advent of democracy and free collectivities. Female access to the power of violence does not, necessarily and mechanically, lead to the greater democratization of the internal functioning and practices of armed groups. If women align their practices with those of the male group they integrate with, their presence would only allow them to contribute to the process of the equalization of the sexes, without really transforming the balance of power among the groups endowed with the power of weapons and those without it (Pruvost, 2008). The idea that sex difference is an obsolete construct (in terms of law, practices and sometimes the body) is the principle which underlies this narrative.

33 A possible eighth narrative: female violence creates a space populated by Amazons which reverses male domination, thus allowing women to achieve a matriarchal society in which they assume a long-term power over men. A fantasy, this kind of social organization has not yet been identified in the development of any known society.
It is only a narrative. Imagining a world in which women could have won the battle of the sexes allows for two opposing conclusions, one that sees the twilight of civilization, the other an enchantment by the idea of a society of women, liberated from heterosexism.

It goes without saying that these typical narratives are not mutually exclusive, that the authors cited for each narrative are sometimes in a position where they criticize: sometimes scientific description, sometimes intellectual participation in this very narrative and its not about doing an exhaustive survey of the representatives of each position, nor of quantifying the proportion represented by each of these narratives, let alone putting them into a timeline. We will retain this typology, partial and biased, that narratives of the vulgar and of the learned may be confused, and they are proliferating and reducible to two opposing tendencies: the narratives sometimes discredit, sometimes value the violence of women. Whether an epiphenomenon, contingent event, unstoppable symptom or major transgression, the occurrence of female violence, when it is recognized, always obliges one to take a position.

3. The social control of violent women

How do institutions of social control interpret female violence? What are the punishments that these violent women incur? In what way do these women disturb the social relations of gender? What are the methodological problems that researchers encounter when studying female violence? These are the questions that are resolved by the contributions collected in this study.

Firstly, some of the articles point out the propensity of institutions of social control to deny female violence as such. This was particularly the case in the 19th century regarding incest: as indicated by Fabienne Gülliani, the phenomenon of incest, since this time period, was intrinsically associated with male action. And the impulse to historicize this masculinization of the incestuous is found both in the penal code and the philanthropical discourses which focus on the “laborer father, alcoholic and violent, seen as the sole actor relative to incest and the moral decay of his home”. The idea of a mother sexually assaulting her child remains unthinkable. The arts of the period followed this impulse by preferring to imagine incest as involving the sister and the daughter rather than the mother. In a very different time and social space, we find the same process at work: it’s the male soccer player who is supposed to commit rude and physically aggressive acts as defined by the Observatory of behaviors. In their article, Nicolas Pénin, Fatia Terfous and Oumaya Hidri Neys also note that the incidents of female violence are noticed even less often because they are overwhelmed by the flood of cases of male violence. Interviews with officials from sanctioning bodies confirm this interpretation: they consider the amount of female violence to be negligible. Far from resulting mechanically from facts observed on the ground, this underestimation of female violence is related to a communication strategy: for the clubs, it’s important that female soccer players are distinguished from their male counterparts both physically (by looking like tomboys) and in terms of behavior (more “civilized” behavior). Ultimately, violence is averted by referees who blow the whistle more, fearing injuries, opting for dialog, helping to defuse some of the violence that could have occurred. We now understand how not only the violence of women is obscured but also how to implement social mechanisms that aim to prevent it.
The under-representation is not only the result of under-registration, but also of a sexual division of labour regarding violence that maintains sexual stereotypes. In this case, the violence is recognized, but interpreted through the prism of male domination. Thus, some of the rare cases of female incest were, in the 19th century, attributed to the spouse as the instigator and who would keep his wife in a state of material and emotional deprivation, and so, in the words of Fabienne Giuliani, allowing for the preservation of the maternal instinct barrier. This is also what Isabelle Lacroix demonstrates in Basque terrorism, which certainly admits of an increase in the number of female militants, but which also reserves to them, at least publicly, the caring function, the care of combatants and prisoners. The media also tends to maintain the image of militants as continuing to lead normal lives as mothers of families.

Within the juvenile justice system there is another type of narrative: psychologization. Véronique Blanchard, through her study of judicial records during the post war boom, demonstrates that some of these young girls had behaviours deemed to be dangerous to themselves and to others, including some actual attacks on people. But [...] these phenomena of violence are most often seen as related to caring rather than criminality. Psychologized, female violence is also culturalized, with girls of foreign origin being subject to virilization. In his analysis of medical-pedagogical observations of young offenders in Belgium (1912-1965), David Niget emphasizes that for him, until the beginning of the 20th century, if brutality appeared to be part of a masculinity under construction, violence by young girls remained unthinkable, secret or symptomatic of their pathological state. With the new penalogical doctrine that prevailed in Belgium at the beginning of the last century and the development, within the juvenile justice system, of psychological sciences aimed at evaluating the trainability of young offenders, we are in the presence of a new type of categorization in relation to female violence. Thought of as “behavioural troubles”, it is both proclaimed and rejected as a form of expression while it is being pathologized. Whether it is being trivialized or dramatized, the shaping of female violence by medical and psychological etiology are, in the institutions of observation, a negation of any type of social or collective nature of any political dimension of this resistance. Here, the psychologizing or psychiatrizing narrative tends to decontextualize, to individualize and depoliticize the violence committed by the girls.

Cédric Le Bodic extends this analysis by proposing a critical reading of clinical and criminological works from the last twenty years about female sexual violence: on the one hand, the male is posited as the measure of all things, relegating sexual deviants to the category of a specific population and, on the other hand, anchoring deviancies within gender-specific qualities. The authors of these clinical studies came to believe that women could not be sexual criminals unless they had somehow been transformed into men by virtue of some type of disorder relating to their female self image. These essentialist discourses allow sexual stereotypes to persist undisturbed.

Subjected to greater organizational and symbolic obstacles, female violence is punished none the less. That is the other salient point that emerges from articles in this issue which relate to the social control of this violence. Rather than directly asking the question about whether women are treated more harshly or gently than men, which would involve a difficult comparison (trying to relate equivalent offences to both sexes, committed by people of the same social class in comparable circumstances), the authors of this issue have explored the progression of women within institutions of social control: are violent women subjected to the same disciplinary paths as their male counterparts?
In this context, Fabienne Giuliani notes that incestuous females, not being indictable for rape, can be charged with indecent assault or complicity in indecent assault. Véronique Blanchard shows how, according to her, the process of psychologizing the violence of juveniles leads to supervision within the civil context. Conversely, when we enter into the “sphere of female dangers” (vagrancy, prostitution, vice), women can be incarcerated without any offence having been committed and recognized: what legitimizes the confinement is less the penal norm than the sexual stereotypes violated by these girls, which force them to prove their modesty. The study by David Niget highlights the importance of the psychiatric supervision imposed on juvenile offenders in institutions: at Saint Gervais (a public institution for observation situated near Namur), many girls were deemed to be violent or “rebels” who were subjected to psychotropic treatments and/or were confined for some period of time in an “isolation ward”. Though medicalized, it is in every sense a disciplinary facility. The invention of new psychotropic drugs is thus accompanied by a return to a discipline-oriented order and a very deterministic interpretation of behavioural problems which associated female violence with a pathological corporeality. There is, therefore, a displacement of the boundaries of social control: from the criminal to the civil, from education to psychiatry. What is therefore emerging are sexually defined types of supervision and treatment of violence which are based on and borrow from gender knowledge.

The punishment differentials might help to reinstate the order of the sexes (strong and weak). Isabelle Lacroix shows that in the case of Basque terrorism, the militants of the ETA testify in greater numbers relative to the sexual tortures suffered during their custody, revealing the recategorization of those women who transgressed gender norms into the ranks of objects of male sexual domination. The punishment of these women exceeds that of others not just by institutions of social control, but also through the media’s treatment of them as female terrorists that are colder and more bloodthirsty than the men. In the case of female footballers, Nicolas Pépin, Fatia Terfous and Oumaya Hidri Neys show that the punishment of violent female footballers occur less because of disciplinary issues than because of rumour, informal or formal, started by uncontrollable players, who are not able to move from one club to another.

Whether dressed in euphemism or reduced to being considered exceptional, female violence is nevertheless something that does occur. It is in this sense that the articles of this collection address the issue of the disturbance of sexual social networks caused by the eruption of female violence. The violent women are indeed doubly deviant: deviant in relation to the laws or regulations which proscribe the use of violence, deviant in relation to the frontiers of gender which they transgress by exercising a male attribute: violence. It is no accident that writers – both well recognized and less so, are focused on female incest of the 19th century. As demonstrated by Fabienne Giuliani, it certainly involves re-telling the story of the human twilight and decadence of that French society, but at the same time, it allows us to see the eroticism and sensuality of women who, rather than remaining passive, act upon their desires. For David Niget and Véronique Blanchard, the juvenile delinquency of these young girls of the first half of the 20th century could be interpreted as the political expression of a freedom equal to that of boys – an expression that is inaudible to the institutions that incarcerate them, but readable between the lines of the archives. Isabelle Lacroix shows in the same way that female access to the rank of armed member of the ETA displaces the traditional boundaries of a Basque culture that sees women as being “the mothers of” and “the wives of” and a militant’s hagiography.
that celebrates male heroes: *motherhood does not seem, as it did in the past, to be an unconditional obstacle to militant activity.* Although the increased feminization of the warrior ranks in the ETA will lead to difficulties in finding new recruits or in the context of strategic force will soften the image of the terrorist group, it will not, however, mean the end of the armed struggle. In other words, the arrival of women does not, in any terms, involve a pacifist turn in the movement, but rather an alignment of women with warrior norms, indicating the predominance of the male gender. Moreover, female violence creates a disturbance in the clear and continuous reiteration of sexual differences. Cédric Le Bodic attributes it to the sexual violence exercised by women, which emerges as a “failure” in the repetition of the norms of gender (such as that of the peaceful female and the warlike male), which creates a breach that questions even the binary principle of the sexes. Cédric Le Bodic suggests that we consider human behavior in terms of a “range”, rather than in terms of vast differences between the sexes.

The contributions to this volume thus lead one to pose questions regarding methodology: how to evaluate a marginal phenomenon? Obscured, consigned to the inconceivable or the pathological, the violent acts committed by women are not always included in criminal records, making it necessary to alter the focus of the analysis. Thus, Véronique Blanchard had to draw upon the civil archives of the juvenile justice system, and, to identify cases of female incest, Fabienne Giuliani had to approach files relating to “abuse”: *To speak of women and incest obliges the historian to multiply the research hypotheses because of the rarity of cases that offer information of interest. Archives that are far from complete yet still allow one to assume the existence of a phenomenon very much present throughout the century.*

The study of a terrorist organization that is still active and subject to police investigation presents the researchers with other problems of access on the ground. Isabelle Lacroix has speculated on this several times: how can one clearly understand the actual gender based division of labour, especially within the fighting units, when it is impossible to conduct direct observations? Do the rates of female arrest and imprisonment reflect this effect with regard to the terrorist terrain or is it rather the selection processes of the police and judicial institutions that are involved? Isabelle Lacroix also mentions all of the situations involving male informants ensuring the *invisibility of their criminal associates.*

The observation of activities that are entirely legal, such as sporting activities, does not necessarily allow for more direct observation: the rareness of physical assaults by women on the football field would require the setting up of a continuous observation device over the span of several years to see the emergence of patterns. Hence the interest, for Nicolas Pénin, Fatia Terfous and Oumaya Hidri Neys, of relying on data from the Observatory of behaviours on violence and anti social behavior in football, and on the “gamesheets” completed by the referees, as well as the minutes of the disciplinary committees. Combining these sources with the testimony of officials from these institutions as well as supervisors of womens’ football allow us to explain the marginality of a phenomenon whose rarity has nothing “natural” about it.

Cédric Le Bodic suggests abandoning the idea of comparing female and male criminality, which portrays the differences between the sexes as insurmountable and ineluctable to the point of being an ontological issue. In adopting the formula of Pat Carlen, according to which the *female criminal does not exist,* he advocates seeing criminality as *a priori* unrelated to gender with the result that gender membership would not, for some, unilaterally refer to the feminine and for others, to the masculine.
This dissolves the very purpose of this volume which, with a queer horizon, would no longer be concerned with the duality of gender as it relates to violent actors, nor with the feminine and masculine types that are brought together in this kind of action, but rather on the violence itself, which would follow other lines of division. This leads us to define violence as primarily a mechanism for discerning distinctions among those social groups that have the legal right along with the material and symbolic power to use it and those social groups that are legally, materially and symbolically deprived.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Chauvaud F. Malandain G. (Eds.), 2009, Impossibles victimes, impossibles coupables. Les femmes devant la justice (XIXe-XXe siècles), Rennes, PUR.


Dorlin E., 2006, La matrice de la race, Paris, La Découverte.


Héritier F., 1996, Masculin/Féminin, la pensée de la différence, Paris, Odile Jacob.


Lavergne C., Perdoncin A. (Eds.), 2010, Décrire la violence, Tracés, 19, numéro spécial.


Lombroso C., [1895], 1896, La femme criminelle et la prostituée, Paris, Felix Alcan.

Mary F.-L., 1996a, Délinquance des femmes et répression pénale, Questions pénales, CESDIP, ministère de la Justice, IX, 5.

Mary F.-L., 1996b, Femmes délinquantes et contrôle pénal. Analyse sociodémographique des statistiques administratives françaises, CESDIP, Études et données pénales, n°75.


Tabet P., 1979, Les mains, les outils, les armes, L’Homme, XIX, 3-4, 5-61.

NOTES

1. Regarding the new development of social science research on this subject, see the inventory that we offer in this issue.
2. Without the ability to rely on an historical study of the appearance and disappearance of the term ‘violence’ on the texts, we have carried out a systematic study of the occurrences of terms relating to violence (singular and plural) in the codes of French in 2010.
3. It must be noted that a third “victim” of violence is mentioned by name, this one relates to agents of the State.
4. Cf. infra our bibliographic inventory.
5. Cécile Prieur “The justice system is more lenient towards women than towards men”, Le Monde, August 29, 1997; “Male and female offenders are unequal before judges. The courts are more lenient towards women”, Le Parisien, December 31, 1996; “According to a study, women go to prison less than men”, Libération, December 31, 1996.
6. In 2004, according to the National Observatory of Delinquency, among the persons questioned by the police and gendarmerie, 15.6% were women, and this figure has not changed since (Soullez, Rizk, 2006).
7. Among those convicted in 2008, there were 60,216 women as against 577,449 men, a rate of 9.4% females (Source: Department of Justice and Freedom, Convictions, 2009).
8. According to statistics provided by the Department of Justice, September 1, 2010, there were 2,085 women jailed in France out of a total population of 66,629 registeres prisoners, a rate of 3.4% being females (Source: Statistics monthly population and registered prisoners detained in France. Situation as of September 1, 2010. Ministry of Justice, Directorate of Prison Administration, Office of Planning Studies and Methods).

INDEX

**Mots-clés**: déviance, violence, femmes, genre
**Keywords**: deviance, violence, women, gender

AUTHORS

**COLINE CARDI**
Assistant Professor (maître de conferences), University of Paris 8, researcher at the Centre de Recherches Sociologiques et Politiques de Paris (CRESPPA). Contact: cardi.coline@gmail.com

**GENEVIEVE PRUVOST**
Senior Researcher (chargée de recherche) at the CNRS, affiliated to the Centre de recherche sociologique sur le droit et les institutions pénales (CESDIP). Contact: gpruvost@free.fr