

Man Bites Dog! How the mainstream media obscures the fact of male violenceⁱ

by Jennie Ruby

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The cumulative effect all this has on the reader is that it fosters a dramatic overestimate of women's violence compared with men's. Psychological research tells us that repetition has a strong effect on memory. It only takes three times driving to work a certain way before it becomes "your way." So let's say it only takes three full-blown stories about women's violence to make us have a sense that "it happens all the time," just like three trips to work become "I always go that way." Yet the same week we see three stories on women's violence, hundreds of worse crimes perpetrated by men go unreported, or are reported only in the form of statistics. The result is a skewed sense of how much female violence there is in comparison to male violence. The result is that even in feminist discussions I hear people say things like "women are just as violent as men."

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

In a "Law & Order" episode a woman is jilted, stalks and murders the man who dumped her, then tries to use a false accusation of sexual harassment to excuse her crime.

In another "Law & Order" episode, a man has trouble finding daycare and combining work and parenting.

On "Ally McBeal," the law firm defends a reverse sex discrimination case.

On VH1, a show on porn stars becoming rock stars implies that female porn stars freely choose that career the same way male rock stars choose their careers.

In "Boogie Nights," a movie that has now reached cable TV, the exploitation of a male porn star is sympathetically portrayed, while the movie itself continues to demean and exploit female porn stars.

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

Are there any TV shows about real people's lives? In fact there are TV dramas about men abusing women, men leaving their children, women surviving as single moms and holding down two jobs. But these shows are ghettoized on the Lifetime TV network--TV for women. They are popularly regarded as sappy tearjerkers not to be taken seriously, much like daytime soap operas. These are not the stuff of mass network TV seen by millions.

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

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

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

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

ⁱ *off our backs*, December 2000, V.30; N.11 p. 12, www.offourbacks.org