

4 *Girls, Gangs, and Violence*

Introduction: Femininities and Aggression

Construction of girls' delinquency and gang membership has always been affected by societal concerns about femininity and girlhood. For most of this century, the regulation of girls' sexuality was dominant, and those activities that did not involve girls' expression of their sexuality, including girls' violence, were largely ignored by those in authority (Shacklady-Smith 1978; see also Bernard, Fishman, and Quicker in this volume).

Early ethnographies, including many reprinted here, indicate that girls have long been involved in violent behavior as a part of gang life, but this violence tended to be ignored or trivialized. Girls' gang experience has always been looked at as less important than boys', somehow not genuine, and defined by the male experience. More recently, it has been the subject of sensationalized media accounts that generally feature young women of color. In general, girls' and women's violence tends either to be completely denied or demonized (see Chesney-Lind 1997). Usually, these constructions are deployed with an eye toward the social control of all women, rather than in the search of a true understanding of the ways in which violence works in the lives of girls on the economic and racial margins.

This section aims to take a far more nuanced look at the role of violence and the gang in the lives of these young women. The four articles explain the ways in which girls and young women "do gender," sometimes violently, in poor communities. They provide a context to understand the use of violence by marginalized girls faced with difficult choices on today's mean streets. The section concludes with a broadside against sensationalized media misrepresentations of female gangs and a plea for greater understanding. That, of course, is one purpose of this volume.

Campbell, in an important piece published here for the first time, contrasts the aggression and violence of middle class girls and women with that of the girls she interviewed who were in gangs. While, in general, Campbell found that female violence was *expressive* as opposed to *instrumental*, such a clear differentiation was not found in her analysis of the violence of girl gang members. Indeed, Campbell is struck by the

instrumental language employed by her gang girls about their violent encounters. Campbell sees the instrumental violence of the gang girls she studied to be functional for an everyday life that is full of danger.

But, for Campbell, that does not mean that gang girls are "tomboys" or pretending to be men. She argues that such instrumental violence by her female gang informants were fundamentally different from how men "do gender." First, she supports the theme we have been demonstrating in this volume that aggression is normative for men, but oppositional for women. Second, boys are, on the whole, physically larger and stronger than girls. Girls, reasonably, thus, have relatively more to fear. Finally, violence is instrumental for men, not only in protection and status, but in making money. Gang women are much less involved with robbery or drug sales than gang men, two activities where violence is exceptionally functional.

These basic differences between male and female gangs are taken up by Hagedorn and Devitt. The title of their article, "Fighting Female," conveys the dual notion that female gang members not only fight others, but fight the stereotyped female role itself. They begin by demonstrating that the very idea of the female gang as a male auxiliary, mixed gender, or independent gang, may not be so much an objective truth as a reflection of different conceptions of gender held by different female gang members.

Hagedorn and Devitt demonstrate that there is substantial variation not only between female gangs, but also within them. This fact should alert readers to be cautious when reading studies based on small samples. Second, the authors of this piece demonstrate that whether the female gang was seen as being led by women or by men, whether the girls met together by themselves or not, and whether girls or guys "called the shots" varied according to the conception of gender held by each female gang member within each gang. Those girls who were more traditional saw the gang as a male auxiliary, while those girls who were more independent saw the gang as the girls' own group. This surprising finding has important implications for gang research.

Finally, the gang girls studied in Milwaukee, as a whole, "loved to fight." Hagedorn and Devitt write about a virtual "celebration" of fighting. Girls' gangs may even have fought more than the boys, but they fought differently, with fewer weapons and with less lethal consequences. In a nutshell, those who most loved to fight had a less male-centered outlook, and those who fought with less relish had more traditional notions of gender. Fighting, in other words, was as much about rebelling against being a stereotyped female as it was to "kick ass."

Deschenes and Esbensen's article takes us to the national level and reinforces the case study evidence of the violence in female gangs. They show that female gang members are more violent than male non-gang members, even in their sample drawn from middle schools with a sizable proportion of middle class students. Still, 8% of the girls in these middle schools reported they had joined gangs, and a fifth of that number reported

they had shot a gun at someone. Female gang violence nationally, this study confirms, is not to be ignored.

Chesney-Lind's piece completes this section, noting that traditional schools of criminology have assumed that for males, delinquency, even in its most violent forms, was somehow an understandable if not "normal" response to their situations. This same "understanding" is not, however, extended to girls who live in violent neighborhoods. If they engage in even minor violence, they are somehow perceived as more vicious than their male counterparts. In this fashion, the construction of an artificial, passive femininity lays the foundation for the demonization of young girls of color, as has been the case in the media treatment of girl gang members.

These sensationalistic accounts tend to suggest to an uncritical public that girls in gangs are seeking "equality" with their male counterparts by the use of violence. These journalistic notions really are little more than the old chestnut that girls are worse than boys, more devious, more cruel, and depraved. Chesney-Lind argues that such constructions bear little resemblance to reality, and links them to a backlash against girls and women, particularly girls and women of color.

All these papers show that girls' gang membership is complex and varied and that we need to seek ways of describing girls' groups without mechanically tying them to boys' groups. Curry (1988) argues that the discussion of girls' involvement with gangs has tended to go to one extreme or the other. Either girls in gangs are portrayed as victims of injury, or they have been portrayed as "liberated," de-gendered gangbangers. The truth is that both perspectives are partially correct and incomplete without the other.

Careful inquiry into the lives of these girls documents the ways in which the gang facilitates survival in their world. This volume is our small contribution to furthering that careful inquiry.