

Expert studies fail to explain why 90% of crime is committed by men

Nature, nurture, the 'criminal gene'—what makes men violent?

As killing in the Republic becomes an almost routine activity, **Kathryn Holmquist** explores the links between violence and gender

ANOTHER news bulletin, another woman murdered. The death of women in violent circumstances has become almost routine, part of everyday life. And for every woman killed, there's a killer: almost invariably, it's a man. So is murder a gen-



All authorities agree that only time will tell if the increase in women being killed is "an artificial blip" or a continuing trend.

"It doesn't feel like a blip," says Dr O'Connor, and many women agree. Some feminists have considered that the empowerment of women threatens men and so their behaviour towards them tends to be more violent. "I don't think it's as deep as that," says Dr O'Connor. "For the average killer it's sex and the thrill of the killing... There isn't any deep-seated philosophical thing."

He also dismisses the influence of video violence and pornography. Pornography users do so because they are already obsessed with sex and violence, not because videos have made them so.

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delegates to the June 10th talks.

These ingenious proposals were devised to help the small fringe groups associated with the loyalist paramilitaries win seats at the negotiating table, and to be able to claim that they have an electoral mandate to be there.

It won't be plain sailing. There will be a large number of parties scrabbling for the last three or four places on the "top-10" list. The fringe loyalist groups will be competing not only against each other, but against other small unionist parties. The situation of David Ervine's Progressive Unionist Party is particularly uncertain. The PUP is rooted in urban Belfast and, unlike the UDP, it does not command sufficient support in rural areas to feel confident of securing an adequate vote.

There was a time, before Sinn Féin built up a credible political base, when many nationalists were prepared to support the IRA but voted for the SDLP to represent them politically. There was an instinctive mistrust of anyone who had been associated with violence. This still applies, but more strongly to members of the traditionally law-abiding unionist community.

They may be weary of the tribal attitudes of Ian Paisley and David Trimble, and even admire the sophisticated and courageous leadership qualities that have been demonstrated by David Ervine and other loyalist leaders.

It does not follow automatically that they will vote for them. There will be a number of small unionist groups offering themselves in the election, and working-class unionists may opt to vote for Bob McCartney, who also offers a non-sectarian vision of the Union but does so with all the confident skills of a successful Queen's Counsel.

THERE is another factor which adds to the uncertainty. It is no secret that successive British ministers have been deeply impressed by the quality of men and women who have involved themselves in community politics in Northern Ireland — often because they have deliberately rejected the main parties — and have wondered how to bring that steady, responsible pragmatism into the mainstream.

By opening up and increasing the number of groups eligible to stand in the election, the Northern Ireland Office has taken a deliberate decision to encourage this new breed of community activists to become involved in the forum, and also possibly in the all-party negotiations.

The most obvious example of a group that could realistically hope to break through the traditional party barriers, and win enough votes to get candidates elected from the regional list, is the newly-formed Northern Ireland Women's Coalition.

These women are not dewy-eyed idealists who believe that lasting peace can be achieved by the wearing of white ribbons. At the meeting I attended in the Ulster People's College last week there were academics, senior executives in the public service, as well as seasoned campaigners with long experience of building bridges across a deep sectarian divide. The heart lifts to think how the presence of Bronagh Hinds, of the Women's European Platform, or Margaret Logue, of the Derry Women's Centre, or any of their colleagues, could influence the all-party talks.

But the decision to put up candidates presents difficulties. Should the Women's Coalition stand in a constituency where there is another woman candidate for one of the established, mainstream parties? In this case, they say, the acid test is where she is ranked in her party's list. If her name is at the top, the party is serious about wanting her to be elected; if she is ranked number four or five this is a token gesture, designed to mop up any undecided women's vote.

An even more difficult choice presents itself in a case where a strong woman candidate might take votes from a man who has a good track record on the broader political issues. Sadly, this dilemma is acute in areas where the small loyalist groups, particularly the PUP, would hope to command electoral support.

In the Shankill, for example, someone like May Blood, a highly-respected trade unionist now involved in job creation in one of the most deprived areas of Belfast, would be an extremely powerful candidate. But if she were to stand, the likelihood is that she would take votes from the Progressive Unionist Party, which is going to need all the help it can get to have any candidates elected.

These are real and difficult choices. Their outcome could determine, and will certainly influence, who gets to shape the political future of Northern Ireland. For all the scepticism that has been voiced about this election, it will shift the emphasis back to democratic political activity and give many people, whose voices we do not often hear, a chance to speak.

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Men have a near-monopoly on crimes of violence. Between 90 and 95 per cent of crime in the Republic, the UK and elsewhere is committed by males. If the non-violent crime in which women engage is factored out, for instance prostitution, shop-lifting and forgery, then men dominate virtually 100 per cent of all crime.

It seems obvious that to understand and so prevent violent crime, we need to understand the male mind. Yet authorities in criminology, sociology and psychology have failed even to approach such understanding. Instead, they have focused on sociological explanations such as poverty and urban deprivation for men's behaviour.

But "if men are driven to commit crime by the educational system and unemployment, why doesn't this affect females?" asks Dr Art O'Connor, author of *Inside the Criminal Mind* and a psychiatrist at the Central Mental Hospital in Dublin.

Mr Ciaran McCullagh, lecturer in sociology at University College Cork, writes in his new publication, *Crime in Ireland: A Sociological Introduction*, that the issue of "low participation rates" of women in crime has "largely been ignored in criminology".

The idea that sociology should focus on women's "low participation rates" exposes the prejudice of the experts. They have also been wrong.

Most explanations rest on the notion that culture socialises women into passivity and nurturing, restricting achievement in crime as in other areas. But as women have moved towards equality, their crime rate has not increased proportionately. Any increase there has been might be attributed to strengthening gender equality and male police being less likely to let criminals off because they are female.

"Sex difference in crime has been so clear and bright that most studies have been blind to it. The literature on delinquency and crime frequently refers to the fact that boys alone were studied 'as there were too few girls in the sample to be statistically significant'. They do not stop to ask why," say Anne Moir and David Jessel in their book *A Mind to Crime*.

If nine out of 10 crimes were committed by women, the academic establishment would surely have explained why by now. It might have held hormones responsible. And hormones are precisely the issue, male hormones.

For instance, testosterone causes aggressive behaviour in men and mice. Detecting the levels can help predict whether a man will act violently.

Another clue to the reasons for male violence is that the neurotransmitters which control impulsive behaviour are found at much lower levels in the male brain. Thus men are less likely to assess the consequences of their actions.

Perhaps this explains why psychological testing has shown young male offenders to be more unafraid, aggressive, extrovert and poorly socialised.

In the first 19 weeks of 1996, 18 people have died violently in the Republic. Of these, eight women were killed in violent circumstances compared to five women in the whole of 1995.

In 1994 the overall murder rate for women and men was 25. In 1995, the final count is 41, according to the Minister for Justice.



The drugs war is partly to blame. "The contract killing, the passionless assassination where a man goes in with a gun and kills and walks out again for money is an increasing phenomenon here which coincides with the downgrading of paramilitary work in Northern Ireland and the increasing availability of guns," says Dr O'Connor.

But many of this year's murders have been in another category: the murder of women either by men they know intimately or don't know at all.

It can be difficult for the academic to understand why women are so disturbed by this. Our annual murder rate, after all, is comparable to a slow weekend in a major US city. Women are safer here than virtually anywhere in the world.

Yet many women wonder about these killers. Do they hate women? Do they watch too much violent pornography? Is this the beginning of a trend?

Mr Fred Lowe, senior clinical psychologist with the Eastern Health Board, has interviewed many young violent males. He has detected a pattern of mature women in their late

20s and 30s being murdered by less mature young men. He recalls one man saying: "I go for the sort of woman who would not have me."

It is all about the "hunter instinct" gone wrong, says Mr Lowe. Young men rape and sometimes kill women as if they were "collecting trophies". Violating an older, more sexually mature woman confers greater status than violating a younger woman. These killings are probably preceded by stalking, "a courtship disturbance" in which the male goes "hunting for a mate" but the process goes wrong, Mr Lowe suggests.

"The kind of behaviour which

leads to assault and which recently has led to killings is this kind of prowling youngster who forms an obsession, watches the woman, takes her underwear from the line and makes nuisance phone calls. It's far too common," says Mr Lowe.

Persistent nuisance phone calls are a strong indication of mental instability. Recipients of such calls should report them to the Garda, says Mr Lowe. He also suggests that women ask male relatives or friends to record the voice greeting on their answering machines.

The young obsessed loner tends to be a misfit with no place in an overcrowded society, Mr Lowe be-

lieves. Fifty years ago, half the Irish population was rural. This lifestyle has collapsed and left many youths ill-prepared for the modern world.

Similarly, Dr O'Connor has noticed the trend of teenagers killing women in their late 20s and early 30s, although he adds that most women murdered in Ireland are killed by husbands or lovers. As in the rest of the Western world, Irish women tend to know their killers intimately, or not at all.

"Some of these murders are kind of random. This woman just happens to be the one the guy came across at that point," Dr O'Connor says.

He also dismisses the influence of video violence and pornography. Pornography users do so because they are already obsessed with sex and violence, not because videos have made them so.

But television news might influence behaviour, he believes: "This strange, odd person thinks about finding an older, more sexually mature woman and killing her and then he sees it happening a few times and may allow his fantasy world to become reality because he's seen it on the news so frequently."

But why is this young male so prone to violence in the first place? "It is undeniably true that genes are involved," writes Steve Jones in *In the Blood: God, Genes and Destiny*. This publication is linked to the forthcoming BBC television series which Jones will present.

The notion of a "criminal gene" has already been used in the US by the legal team of a convicted murderer, Stephen Mobley, who is on death row in a Georgia prison.

After he was sentenced to death, his lawyers won an appeal. They argued that he was not acting on the basis of "free will" but due to a genetic predilection. Virtually his entire family, they said, were violent.

In the US legal teams have argued that a killer has an innate tendency towards unacceptable behaviour. This, they hope, will reduce the blame attaching to the crime. One woman who received a life sentence for killing her mother was released by another judge when it was discovered that she was suffering from inherited Huntington's Disease, a progressive degeneration of the nervous system, one of the first signs of which is mental instability.

Is this a compassionate reprieve or an excuse for killing? At present, Irish society is profoundly uneasy at the prospect of murderers previously deemed "insane" being released when they are found "sane". To establish a genetic link to crime is to give the ultimate excuse. If gene or drug therapy were discovered, presumably murderers could then be treated and released.

And it doesn't end there. "Why should there be evil?" asks Steve Jones. "If a man is born sinful, how should he be forgiven? The issue strikes at the very core of belief and of society. The idea of a 'gene for crime' in fact poses a theological question."

"If certain people are born with a nature that makes it inevitable that they will offend, how can they be blamed, or judged? How can there be equality before God or the law if one group — how large, nobody knows — can claim lifelong immunity from its full rigours, with evidence written into DNA?"

There is another obvious question: if there is a criminal gene and if men have that gene, should we excuse them when they behave violently?

Even Jones acknowledges that genes are an insufficient explanation for a male criminality. Nurture is at least as important as nature. Which brings us to the ultimate question: are we, as a society, finally prepared to take seriously the question of educating boys to be gentle and socially adaptable?

CORRECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

Last Saturday's *Quidnunc* column said that the FF MEP, Mr Brian Crowley, was nominated to the Seanad in 1993 by Mr C.J. Haughey. In fact, he was nominated by Mr Albert Reynolds.

A headline in the World News pages of yesterday's later editions should have read: "UN report says Israel's shelling was unlikely to have been procedural error". The initials "US" appeared instead of "UN".

Last Saturday's report on Opera Theatre Company's

tour said its production of *Amadigi* had been invited to the Edinburgh Festival. This should have read the Edinburgh Festival Theatre. And the show is going to Buxton Opera Festival in July, not June, as stated.

Where errors occur it is the policy of The Irish Times to correct or clarify as soon as practicable.

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