

## Women, Girls and Gendered Violence

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### Introduction

Developments in understanding violence in the lives of women and girls have been closely associated with shifts in feminist research in criminology and related disciplines. However, debate about the link between gender and violence continues among feminist scholars and others with opposed theoretical and political positions. A recurrent focus of this dispute has been the 'gender gap' in offending and two issues have attracted considerable scholarly and popular attention. The first is whether women and girls are becoming more violent, and the second is whether women and men are equally involved as perpetrators of intimate partner domestic violence.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter reviews these debates, tracing the way in which competing research findings reflect different conceptualisations of gender and violence. It also examines shifts in feminist approaches that provide tools for thinking about these issues differently. Neither gender nor violence is a straightforward concept. Challenges to essentialist approaches to theorising gender and rethinking dichotomies such as victim/agent, victim/offender and expressive/instrumental violence have resulted in richer and more nuanced accounts of gender and violence and identified new research questions. Australian researchers have made notable contributions to these developments.

### Violence as Gendered?

Researchers working with mainstream theories usually measure *sex* at the individual level. They sometimes take women's or girls' offending into account, but usually fail to consider the complexities of *gender* (Miller & Mullins 2009: 33) and or 'the varied mechanisms by which gender may influence delinquency' (Agnew 2009: 8). As a result, they offer limited insight into gender differences in offending or explanation as to why gender differences are greater for serious violence than other offences (Agnew 2009).

<sup>1</sup> In some jurisdictions, including New South Wales, the legal definition of domestic relationship for the purpose of laws concerning domestic violence is very broad and may include intimate partners, other relatives, housemates and carers (*Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007* (NSW) s 5).

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positive factors that contribute to low rates of violence in some Indigenous communities.

Lastly, there is a clear need for Australian research to give more specific consideration to girls. They are over-represented as victims of violence but are often overlooked in research and policy that focuses on violence against women. They have higher rates of offending than adult women for some forms of violence – although not lethal violence. Yet, despite rhetoric of ‘the new violent girl’, studies of violence rarely engage with girls. ‘Gendered violence’ is not usually applied to describe violence by girls even though the structural inequality highlighted by that term and gendered situational contexts are likely to be salient factors that influence their involvement in crime.

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