

WOMEN IN PERIL

A Look at TV's Disturbing New Storyline Trend



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Overview

Violence and the notion of women in peril have played a role in entertainment for centuries. But in recent years, storylines depicting violence against females are being shown more graphically and in ways that have not been seen in the history of television. This study is an examination of fatal and nonfatal female victimizations as represented on prime-time broadcast television from 2004 to 2009.

The Parents Television Council observed a significant increase in the incidence of female victimization; an increase in the depiction of teen girls as victims; an increase in the use of female victimization as a punch line in comedy series; and an increase in the depiction of intimate partner violence (i.e., violence committed by a current or former partner or spouse; a sexual relationship is not necessarily implied).

Background of the Study

The impact of female victimization storylines has been demonstrated in previous scientific studies showing exposure to filmed violence against women leads to decreased perceptions of violence, systematic reductions in emotional reactions, and reduction in self-reported physiological arousal to the violence in the films. (D. Linz, E. Donnerstein, S. Adams, 2006).

Considering that in real life females are generally murdered by people they know, central to any study of female victimization is the topic of domestic violence. In 64% of female homicide cases reported in 2007, females were killed by a family member or intimate partner (24% of female homicide victims were killed by a spouse or ex-spouse; 21% were killed by a boyfriend or girlfriend; and 19% by another family member). (S. Catalano, E. Smith, H. Snyder and M. Ran, September, 2009).

In 2008, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported females age 12 or older experienced approximately 552,000 nonfatal violent victimizations (rape/sexual assault, robbery, or aggravated or simple assault) by an intimate partner (a current or former spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend). In 2007, 70% of victims killed by an intimate partner were female.

These are staggering statistics. However, a more recent study (October, 2009) by the Justice Department's office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention reported that most children in the United States are exposed to violence in their daily lives. More than 60% of children surveyed were exposed to violence within the past year, either directly or indirectly, according to data compiled by the department. The survey found that nearly half of all children surveyed were assaulted at least once in the past year, and about 6% were victimized sexually. One in five of those between the ages of 14 and 17 reported they had seen a shooting.

We need to take a closer look at how our culture of violence is being informed by a violent media culture, and what patterns of behavior we can expect to emerge in the future based on trends we are currently seeing on television.

Study Parameters and Methodology

The purpose of the present study is to compare the qualitative and quantitative differences in the treatments of violence against women on prime-time broadcast television between 2004 and 2009. (Primetime is defined as the hours 8:00-11:00 p.m. ET/PT Monday-Saturday, 7:00-11:00 p.m. ET/PT Sundays.)

PTC analysts examined all prime-time programming (excluding sports and news programs) on the major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC)* during the February and May 2004 and 2009 sweeps periods for a total of 209.5 hours of programming. Analysts recorded and categorized the type and extent of violence in each program, as well as the outcome, the gender and apparent age of the victim, the number of violent scenes within each program, and the number of violent actions within each scene.

*CW and MyNetworkTV did not exist in 2004.

Major Findings

Finding #1: Violence against women and teenage girls is increasing on television at rates that far exceed the overall increases in violence on television. Violence, irrespective of gender, on television increased during the study period only 2% from 2004 ($N=3840$) to 2009 ($N=3929$), while the incidence of violence against women increased 120% during that same period ($N=195-429$). (For purposes of this study “incidence” is defined as the number of storylines that included female victims of violence).

Table 1: Number of Times Female Victims of Violence Were Shown On Screen during Each Study Period for 2004 and 2009

Network	Sweeps Period	2004	2009
ABC	February	9	16
	May	17	17
NBC	February	12	38
	May	15	54
CBS	February	57	81
	May	39	99
Fox	February	13	66
	May	33	58
TOTAL		195	429

(The above data does not reflect the number of times the violence was represented [incidence] within each segment. Many segments contained more than once incident).

Table 2: Increase in Violence Directed at Women Versus General Increase in Violence

YEAR	FEMALE	GENERAL
2004	195	3840
2009	429	3929
% Change	120%	2%

- **Cumulatively, across all study periods and all networks, the most frequent type of violence was beating (29%), followed by credible threats of violence (18%), shooting (11%), rape (8%), stabbing (6%), and torture (2%). Violence against women resulted in death 19% of the time.**
- **Violence towards women or the graphic consequences of violence tends overwhelmingly to be depicted (92%) rather than implied (5%) or described (3%).**

EXAMPLES

CROSSING JORDAN - NBC, May 23, 2004

Peter and Jordan do an autopsy on a woman's decomposing corpse. There is a close-up shot of her face and then a flashback to the events surrounding her death. The captain of a fishing boat rips the woman's clothing and appears to be forcing himself on her. Another fisherman pulls him off. The captain grabs her and throws her into the wall. She falls against the fish hook and blood comes out of her mouth.

DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES – ABC March 22, 2009

Dave is shown loading a hunting rifle while camping in the woods with Mike and Katherine and following them while they hike together. He aims the gun at Katherine and shoots her in the chest. This turns out to be Dave's daydream. Later in the episode Dave attempts to enact his plan to kill Katherine, but fails.

HEROES – NBC, April 27, 2009

Images from Sylar's past life flash on the screen, including a scene of him stabbing a woman in the chest with some scissors.

PRISON BREAK – Fox, May 15, 2009

Sarah is tied up while T-Bag intimidates her.

T-BAG: Tell me, has Scofield ever run up your clock? Has he been man enough to go there? Or is he saving it up for the wedding night?

SARAH: Michael is more man than you could ever hope to be.

T-BAG: How would you know what a man is like? Of the two of us, I bet I've been with more of them. Look at you, all buttoned up, frigid. Tell me, what does it take to loosen up a girl like you? Is it music, flowers, touch? Where the fingers do the walking down to where only...

T-Bag wiggles his fingers down her body.

...

T-BAG: You know I was always thinking the way I was gonna get revenge on Scofield was to kill him, driving a knife right into his bleeding heart. And now, standing here looking at you I'm thinking there's something worse than death for him.

SARAH: Please, no.

T-BAG: I'll return you in one piece, but that piece is gonna be a little used. That's all. And every time he looks at you, every time he wants to be with you, he's gonna see me.

...

T-BAG: Ooo, I bet you was a tomcat back when you was using. See nowadays you like to look a fella in the eyes, but back then, back then I bet the last thing you wanted to do was see who you was keeping company with, huh?

T-Bag spreads her arms apart and handcuffs them to the handles of the sliding glass door.

T-BAG: Now I'm gonna be a gentleman about this and I'm gonna let you choose. You tell me how you like it Sarah and I'm gonna give ya just what the doctor ordered.

Finding #2: Every network with the exception of ABC demonstrated a dramatic increase in the number of storylines that included violence against women between 2004 and 2009.

Table 3: Number of Storylines that Included Female Victims of Violence and Percent of Increase by Network

Network	# of Violent Incidents 2004	# of Violent Incidents 2009	% of Increase
CBS	54	118	119%
NBC	24	70	192%
Fox	40	82	105%
ABC	18	25	39%

Finding #3: Although female victims appeared to be primarily of adult age, collectively, there was a 400% increase in the depiction of teen girls as victims across all networks from 2004 to 2009.

Table 4: Percent Increase in Depiction of Teens as Victims

Network	2004	2009	% of Increase in the Depiction of Teens As Victims
CBS	2	14	600%
NBC	2	8	300%
Fox	1	8	700%
ABC	1	-	-100%

EXAMPLES

C.S.I. – CBS, May 5, 2009

A teenage girl is shown dead in a parking lot (more than once). A teenage girl is shown being attacked by her friend’s father in a flashback. A teenage boy is shown dosing a girl with a date rape drug in her drink at a party. The same boy is shown attempting to have sex with the unconscious girl. Lab techs discuss the presence of GHB and evidence of a sexual assault found on the teenaged victim.

MEDIUM – NBC, March 9, 2009

Allison is aiding with the investigation of a murdered girl. She shows a suspect photos of the victim, whose slit throat is covered in blood.

Finding #4: Fox stood out for using violence against women as a punch line in its comedies -- in particular *Family Guy* and *American Dad* -- trivializing the gravity of the issue of violence against women.

EXAMPLES

FAMILY GUY – Fox, May 17, 2009

-NARRATOR: And so Griffin Peterson and Lady Redbush were happily reunited. Of course, Griffin had to go through the complex, extensive divorce procedure required by 18th Century Society.

The scene cuts to Peter shooting Meg dead with a musket.

AMERICAN DAD – Fox, March 29, 2009

-Stan asks a woman from the Guinness Book of World Records if he could use her hot air balloon to get back to the U.S. When she refuses, Stan points his gun at her face.

Stan: What if I told you I’m about to set the record for shooting a woman in the face the most times in a row?

A man is about to shoot Stan, but Meg kills him first and says, “Nobody shoots my back-up husband.” Stan says he loves Meg. When Meg approaches for a hug, Stan punches her in the face and takes her shotgun.

Finding #5: From 2004 to 2009 there was an 81% increase in the incidence of intimate partner violence on television.

Table 5: Percent of Increase in Intimate Partner Violence Across All Networks

Year	Total Number of Intimate Partner Violence Scenes
2004	16
2009	29
	TOTAL PERCENT INCREASE FROM 2004 TO 2009 = 81%

EXAMPLES

CSI: MIAMI – CBS, May 10, 2004

Investigators find a corkscrew that is consistent with the stab wounds on Nicole's body. They reconstruct what happened in a flashback: Nicole and Veronica are fighting. Nicole swings a wine bottle at Veronica and Veronica stabs Nicole. Afterwards, she drags Nicole out of the house, into the garage, leaving a huge smear of blood on the floor.

As more evidence comes available, investigators reconstruct the crime. This time, a flashback shows a man from the health club showing up at Veronica's, upset to find he was rejected in favor of another woman. He is shown attacking and fighting with Nicole. Nicole hits him with a wine bottle, and he stabs her with the corkscrew.

THE UNUSUALS - ABC, May 6, 2009

Officer Lewis Powell wakes in an alley covered in blood, with his off-duty weapon missing. He tells Walsh he may have killed someone the night before during an alcohol-induced blackout and asks for his help. They discover that Officer Powell was drugged by a bartender who killed his ex-girlfriend and tried to frame Officer Powell for the crime. The murder is not shown but the woman's body is. She is found in a hotel room, face down on a bed with cuts on her body and bruises on her face.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By depicting violence against women with increasing frequency, or as a trivial, even humorous matter, the networks may be contributing to an atmosphere in which young people view aggression and violence against women as normative, even acceptable.

It is our sincere hope that this study will serve as a wake-up call to television producers and network executives; to members of the advertising community who make broadcast television programming possible; to our elected and appointed public servants; and most importantly, to the viewing public. While it would be premature to assert that violence toward women is the new norm on television, or

that depictions of violence toward women has reached the same epidemic proportions as all depictions of violence on TV, this emerging pattern points to a disturbing trend, and it is one to which all parties concerned must put a stop, before it goes any further.

Countless millions of dollars are invested annually at the local, state, national and international levels to reduce violence against women and to lessen its impact on society; but today's television programming may be undermining those efforts, as actress Nicole Kidman acknowledged recently. On October 21, 2009, Kidman testified before a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee that is considering legislation to address violence against women. During questioning, Ms. Kidman conceded that Hollywood has probably contributed to violence against women by portraying them as weak sex objects, according to the Associated Press.

Kidman's observation that Hollywood is part of the problem is consistent with a vast body of academic and medical research pointing to media violence as a significant risk factor leading to real world violence. Childhood exposure to media violence has been found to be predictive of aggressive behavior in both male and female young adults. Identifying with the perpetrators of violence on TV, as well as the realism of TV violence, also predicts later aggression. (L. Rowell Huesmann, Jessica Moise-Titus, Cheryl-Lynn Podolski, and Leonard D. Eron, 2003). Therefore, if children see violence toward women modeled on television, if they identify with the persons committing the violent acts, and they perceive what they are seeing as being realistic, research supports the conclusion that this will influence the child's behavior.

Some may argue that the television content cited in this report only reflects the realities of the world today. And it would be naïve to suggest that violence against women is less a problem in the real world than it truly is. But given the uniquely pervasive nature of the broadcast medium, and given the public interest obligations of the broadcast stations, the paramount focus must be placed on the impact that television programming is having on our society, not *vice versa*.

Those involved in the creation of television programming must be vigilant not to trivialize, sexualize, or glamorize violence against women. We applaud Ms. Kidman for courageously taking a stand with her own career in refusing to be a part of those storylines, and we call on her peers in the entertainment industry to reject such messages coming from Hollywood and to work to actively combat the normalization of violence against women.

In 2007 after the release of *Dying to Entertain*, the PTC's last comprehensive analysis of violence on television, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) issued a report urging Congress to take action to address violent programming. Congress held one hearing after that report was issued, but the intense lobbying efforts of the broadcast and cable television industry led to a swift cessation of any further debate, and nothing has been done since.

Further hearings on the issue of media violence are long overdue. Legislation may or may not be the answer, but what is abundantly clear is that the industry is currently headed in a direction with devastating consequences to the public. We hope that industry leaders will commit themselves to a swift reversal of this trend. The PTC pledges to work tirelessly to hold advertisers that sponsor such graphic images accountable for underwriting it. And if the television industry is unwilling or unable to take serious steps to reduce or tone down such graphic images, then we will urge the Congress and the FCC, by virtue of their regulatory authority over the public airwaves, to step in and take action.

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