

Bad Girls, Bad Girls, Whatcha Gonna Do?

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Suddenly the world is filled with nasty girls. The movie "Mean Girls" is the top movie in the country. Girls just want to be mean," the *New York Times Magazine* announced recently as a slew of new books on girls' relational aggression told us how "to tame them," to use the *Times'* own words.

Girls will be (backstabbing, catty) girls—the latest flavor de jour of the American media's love affair with "bad" girls. Hardly a new idea in a country that grew up reading Longfellow's poem about his daughter: "when she was good, she was very very good, but when she was bad she was horrid."

Then came the ultimate girl fight in living color. Full-scale "savagery in the Chicago suburbs," *Newsweek* called it. Junior girls from the privileged Glenbrook North High School paid for the right to be hazed by seniors at the annual powder puff football game. After the beatings and humiliations ended, five girls were sent to the hospital, one with a broken ankle, another with a concussion so serious it caused memory loss, another to receive 10 stitches in her scalp.

As authors who write about girls' anger, aggression and violence, we are troubled, for reasons that are obvious and some that are less so. Violence that girls perpetrate on other girls, whether it's emotional or physical, is cause for concern. But the media frenzy that greeted the lurid and voyeuristic video of girls fighting other girls is also problematic. In fact, it signals another major issue for those concerned about girls' development. Girls grow up in a world that has long encouraged, them to turn their rage against one another—and then likes to be in the audience for the fight. Like the Glenbrook parents, they might even supply the beer .

Girls' anger has a long history of being dismissed ("she's just a bitch," "it must be PMS") and trivialized ("you're beautiful when you're angry"). Girls violence is generally either ignored entirely or sensationalized and sexualized. Girlfighting, in particular, is often presented as a spectacle (consider mud or Jello wrestling) enjoyed for its eroticism as much as its entertainment value (think Jerry Springer).

The hazing we watched up-close and personal, over and over again, was horrifying, but questions about how and why the episode gripped the nation are at least as troubling. Who was it watching the events unfold on the field? Why was it caught on videotape to begin with? How was it passed on to cable and network television? Who made the decision to run it repeatedly? Why was it international news?

Girlfighting as spectator sport. Again.

Why, when boys perpetrate 80 percent of serious violence in the U.S., is this the story that captivates us-and helps define a generation of girls?

In the shock and awe, we've missed the point. The school principal suggests this is just kids with "old scores to settle." That doesn't tell us enough and, worse, it fudges the real issues.

This was girls fighting over boyfriends and popularity. The seniors used words like "bitches," "wimps," and "sluts" to shame the juniors into staying on the field. In what many think of as post-feminist America, it's not popular to raise issues of power and subordination, but the fact that girls are fighting other girls in front of videotaping boys, is hardly insignificant. That girls used sexist and misogynistic language to control other girls during and after the event and that their fights were primarily for boys' attention and favor is a symptom of deeper cultural problems. As with many girl fights, boys are both the "cause" of girl's violence and the real audience.

We need to ask harder, more critical questions about why girls are fighting. Why embrace insults that ratify the sexual double standard? Why is strength in women always de-valued as "bitchiness?" Why the endless competition among girls for male approval? And why fight each other instead of against a culture still rife with sexism and violence toward women?

Girlfighting gets acted out horizontally on other girls because this is the safest and easiest outlet for their outrage and frustration. Girls are essentially accessing and mimicking the male violence they sometimes know all too well; and they are choosing victims that are societally approved—other girls. This pattern of horizontal aggression has long characterized subordinate groups since it manages the inevitable anger in the group being controlled without jeopardizing the over all structure of male privilege.

Girls' violence also served one additional purpose. It's not uncommon for the targets of that violence to, themselves, be the group members that are challenging the rigid norms of girlhood. Why, for example, wouldn't the girlfighters go after those "girly girls" that the media continuously tells them are weak, vapid, and stupid? From the evil head cheerleaders in the Disney Channel's *Kim Possible* and *Lizzie McGuire*, to *The Man Show's* Juggy Squad on Comedy Central, to *Thong Song* wannabes, these girls make easy targets.

Girls who take out other girls for being "dykes," "hos," and "bitches" can prove they are different, worth taking seriously, a force to contend with. No wimps, wusses, or victims here. But this posturing is short-lived protection at best, because selling out other girls this way only continues a climate of misogyny, and any wrong move can quickly turn the perpetrator into a victim

The problem is not girls; the problem is a culture that denigrates, commodifies and demoralizes women and then gets a kick out watching the divide and conquer consequences.

There's an old saying, "men kill their weak, women kill their strong." If we would give girls legitimate avenues to power, value their minds as much as their bodies, they'd be less likely to go down those nasty, underhanded or openly hostile roads, less likely to take their legitimate rage out on other girls. Let's face it, "meanness" and other covert aggressions are, in the final analysis, weapons of the weak; horizontal violence ultimately ratifies boy not girl power. When we join with girls to- create real pathways to power and possibility, we'll have a lot less to videotape and we'd have a lot more to be proud of both in ourselves and in our daughters.