

Just as Fierce

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By **Katherine Dunn**

The girl wanted to fight. She was young and blonde and she spoke good English and at first the guys in the boxing gym laughed.

But when Dallas Malloy stepped into an amateur boxing ring in Lynnwood, Wash., last year, she broached a barrier far more imposing than the crusty male bastion of the sport. She challenged an ancient and still powerful tradition of what it is to be female. She defied what may be our most pervasive notion of gender difference—the idea that men are physically aggressive and women are not.

Malloy was 16 years old, the youngest daughter of college professors. She was already an accomplished pianist, writer, and athlete when she drew international attention by suing U.S. Amateur Boxing for gender discrimination and won the right for American women to compete as amateur boxers. Reporters and television news crews from three continents

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jostled for space at ringside to watch Malloy outpoint Heather Poyner in the first sanctioned women's match.

Asked why they wanted to fight, the young women said they enjoyed it, just as some men and boys do.

The more potent, unasked question is how society at large reacts to eager, voluntary violence by females, and to the growing evidence that women can be just as aggressive as men. A small part of that question was answered in the bleachers that October fight night, as packs of rowdy women lawyers waved manicured fists and cheered with tears streaming down their cheeks.

After 13 years as a boxing reporter, I was a little misty myself on that historic night. Much about Dallas Malloy seemed familiar. A certain steadiness in her eyes reminded me of the woman who raised me.

My mother, still a witty and gifted artist in her hale 80s, got a rifle a few years ago. I pity the burglar who gives her a chance to use it. When we kids were small, she never had a formal weapon but made do with whatever came to hand. Her broom, skillet, spoon, or shovel served to rein in pesky bill collectors, hostile relatives, rats, rattlesnakes, rambunctious drunks, or any other threat to the peace of her regime. Mom came from a line of frontier females who could drive four horses and the school bus, plow and shoot

straight, slaughter beeves and negotiate a sale, reroof the barn, and then go home to embroider flowers on pillowcases while supervising the kids' math homework.

One of Mom's favorite relatives was her Aunt Myrtle, a gentle woman, revered by her farming clan. A classic Myrtle tale describes how she dashed into the subzero cold one winter night, clad only in boots and a nightie, to battle a pack of prairie wolves who were killing her prize turkeys. My mother, a child then, watched amazed from the kitchen window as Myrtle the dainty, the kind, danced with her kindling hatchet flashing into the skulls and spines of fanged and flickering beasts. Blood exploded in black sprays across the snow. "And that Christmas," the story always ends, "she gave us kids wolfskin mittens, with the fur side in, and stitched snowflakes on the cuffs."

More than 70 years have passed since Myrtle swung her hatchet. Our current era is downwind from the social upheaval of the Vietnam War, the pacifism of the civil rights movement, and the determined progress of feminism. American culture is torn between our long romance with violence and our terror of the devastation wrought by war and crime and environmental havoc. In our struggle to restrain the violence and contain the damage, we tend to forget that the human capacity for aggression is more than a monstrous defect, that it is also a crucial survival tool. The delicate task is to understand the nature, uses, and hazards of the tool. The first step is to recognize that it exists, and that we all possess it to one degree or another—even us women.

This is difficult because so many of us are convinced that women are incapable of aggression on the same scale as men—that women are physically too weak, or are inherently, biologically different in aggressive capacity, or are spiritually superior to the whole concept of violence. These beliefs are the legacy of ancient, traditional definitions of the female role, inadvertently augmented by some recent efforts to combat the oppressive social factors that still assail women.

But most of us would not be here without a generous sprinkling of physically aggressive women in our bloodlines. Throughout most of human history, long before antibiotics and prepackaged foods, many women had to be strong or they didn't survive. They had to be fierce or their young did not survive. And these gifts have not declined in this upholstered age of air conditioning.

The regular cop on the night beat in my neighborhood is alone in her patrol car because of budget cuts. Some midnights I can see her parked across the street, doing paperwork by the dash lights. The clerks at the local 24-hour market say our cop calmly interrupted a mugging in the parking lot last week. The bad guy was big and wild, but she grabbed him and held him facedown on the pavement until her backup arrived. A thumbhold of some kind, the clerks think.

During the last few decades, American women have proven their efficacy in every law enforcement agency, earned the trust of those who fight forest fires beside them, and struggled for the right to demonstrate brains, resourcefulness, courage, and strength in a

thousand venues from sports to the space shuttle. But the idea that women can't take care of themselves still permeates our culture.

The bouncer at many a college tavern will let a scrawny, pencil-necked male wander home alone at 2 a.m., but will insist on an escort for the captain of the women's soccer team. This kind of protectionist attitude, however grounded in good intentions, defines women as less than equal to men. It also reinforces the stereotype of the helpless female for both victim and assailant: Women believe they are helpless against male aggression; criminals see women as vulnerable.

The fact that women are subject to rape (and men, for the most part, aren't) is often used as the reason why females warrant special protection. While this distinction is not to be dismissed, the fact remains that the majority of rapes in the United States are committed behind closed doors by people known to the victims. Rape by strangers on the street is dramatically less frequent than muggings and assaults. Advocating protectionism for women based solely on their vulnerability to rape further reinforces their victimization, and discounts other vicious acts as serious crimes. Women's "rapability" seems small justification for the uncategorical separation of the sexes.

There is no denying that some women could use the protection of a stronger person—but so could some men. And when the soccer captain, a fit, fleet expert in the elbow, kick, and headbutt, believes she needs a bodyguard to get to her dorm room, she has been robbed of part of her own identity.

Ironically, some of the most dedicated defenders of women have enhanced this mythology of weakness, rather than worked to combat it. The intense campaigns against domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, and inequity in the schools all too often depend on an image of women as weak and victimized. A few well-known feminist leaders, including Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon, and Patricia Ireland, regularly portray women as helpless targets of male violence.

This idea that males are physically aggressive and females are not has distinct drawbacks for both sexes. Defining men as the perpetrators of all violence is a viciously immoral judgment of an entire gender. And defining women as inherently nonviolent condemns us to the equally restrictive role of sweet, meek, and weak.

Most arguments for a difference in aggression between the sexes fluctuate somewhere between nature and nurture. But hard as it may be to believe, there is no known biological reason that women cannot be as physically aggressive as men. Geneticist Anne Fausto-Sterling and biologist Ruth Hubbard are two of the many women scholars who are critical of research that postulates a variety of biologically determined gender differences beyond the reproductive functions. Both scholars argue that the innumerable factors of nature and nurture affect each other in highly complex ways.

Anne Fausto-Sterling has examined many familiar theories of biological difference. Her work debunks claims that physiological differences exist in male and female brains, and

that females have better verbal abilities, worse visual-spatial abilities, and less capacity for mathematics than males.

Fausto-Sterling also attacks the central idea that males are inherently, biologically more aggressive than females. She specifically deflates the myth of testosterone—often named as the root cause of war, riots, murder, bar brawls, corporate takeovers, wife beating, clear-cutting, and other forms of “male” aggression—demonstrating that no credible evidence indicates that testosterone causes aggression. In fact, studies of soldiers preparing for battle in Vietnam suggest that testosterone levels actually drop severely in anticipation of stressful situations.

Gender differences in the form and context in which aggression is expressed, concludes Fausto-Sterling, are more likely to be caused by learned and cultural factors than by biology. The broad spectrum of aggressive behavior in humans is far more complex than the mere squirting of a gland. Science is only beginning to grapple with the jungle of questions and concerns that surround it.

Even our understanding of physical differences between women and men is changing. In *The Politics of Women's Biology*, Ruth Hubbard points out that many physical characteristics are extremely variable, depending on environmental and behavioral factors. We tend to assume, for example, that men are genetically endowed with greater upper-body strength. But this disparity (and others of size and strength) between the sexes is inflated by cultural strictures on exercise, variations in diet, and other factors.

Training of female athletes is so new that the limits of female possibility are still unknown. In 1963 the first female marathon runners were almost an hour and a half slower than the best male runners. Twenty years later the fastest women were within 15 minutes of the winning male speed. Female sprinters are now within a fraction of a second of the top male speeds, and some experts predict that early in the next century women will match male runners.

Perhaps the strongest evidence that women have as broad and deep a capacity for physical aggression as men is anecdotal. And as with men, this capacity has expressed itself in acts from the brave to the brutal, the selfless to the senseless.

Historical examples of female aptitude for the organized violence of warfare, for instance, include the 19th-century tradition of African women warriors who formed the core legions of the kingdom of Dahomey and the 800,000 Russian women who fought in every combat position and flew as fighter pilots during World War II. The gradual movement of women into combat positions in the military forces of Canada, Britain, the Netherlands, Norway, the United States, and other nations is evidence of a growing contemporary understanding that women can be as dangerous as men.

And while national military forces have historically resisted the full participation of women soldiers, female talent has found plenty of scope in revolutionary and terrorist groups around the planet. According to criminologists Harold J. Vetter and Gary R.

Perlstein, nearly a quarter of the original Russian revolutionary terrorists were women—mostly from the educated middle class. More recently, Ulrike Meinhof and the other women of the nihilist Baader-Meinhof gang were only the most publicized of many female terrorists in Europe. There is also substantial female revolutionary involvement in the Irish Republican Army, the Basque Separatists, the Italian Red Brigades, and the Palestinian Intifada, as well as in revolutionary groups throughout Asia, Africa, and Central and South America.

In *Shoot the Women First*, British journalist Eileen MacDonald published remarkable interviews with 20 female terrorists, including Leila Khalid, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in the '70s. The book's title is taken from advice reportedly given by Interpol to anti-terrorist squads. Many experts, it seems, consider female terrorists more dangerous than males. They are reputed to endure more pain and to stay cooler in a crisis. The Basque women interviewed by MacDonald gleefully admitted to escaping severe punishment when caught by claiming that a boyfriend had fooled or forced them into robbing the bank, firing the gun, or planting the bomb. The women saw this as outwitting the authorities by turning their own antiquated macho mind-set against them.

Nonetheless, it is still popular to assert that all female criminals are driven by male threat or patriarchal pressure. (The characters in *Thelma & Louise* and the defense of serial killer Aileen Wuornos are good examples of this stereotype.) Although on the surface this presumption of female innocence corrupted by male aggression seems complimentary, in fact it is deeply patronizing. Columnist Amy Pagnozzi, writing for the *New York Daily News* on the trial of Lorena Bobbitt, said, “A baby. That's what an American jury decided Lorena Bobbitt was yesterday, in deciding she was not responsible for her actions. It is a decision that infantilizes and imperils all women.”

On the rare occasion when a woman has been held responsible for her actions, she's been branded a monster far more frightening than a male perpetrating the same acts. For years scholars believed female criminals were hormonally abnormal, with more body hair, low intelligence, even an identifiable bone structure. Freud thought all female criminals wanted to be men. The female criminal violates two laws—the legal and cultural stricture against crime and the equally profound taboo against violent females.

As in the public sphere, there is ample evidence that women can be as physically aggressive behind closed doors as men. Here, too, a failure to acknowledge the bad that women can do is a failure to take women seriously.

We should not be surprised when women's aggression is expressed in the one place where they have traditionally held equal or superior status, the home. And it is in the home where that most frightening of crimes, child abuse, most often occurs. Studies of family violence and reports from state and national agencies are consistent in finding that while males commit the majority of sexual molestations of children, women commit more physical abuse of children than men. A Justice Department study released this July found that a full 55 percent of offspring murders are committed by women.

Considering how much more time women spend caring for children than men do, these figures shouldn't be surprising. Unless, of course, we fail to recognize that women are capable of violent reactions to stress just as men are. Yet female involvement is scarcely visible in the media's coverage of child abuse.

Spousal abuse is an area where research is questioning still more closely held beliefs about sex roles and violence. Historically, the campaign against wife battering has been a primary vehicle for the "men violent, women nonviolent" message. There is no question that a terrible number of women are brutalized, and even killed, by their male partners. Every effort should be made to punish the perpetrators, help the victims, and, most of all, prevent such crimes in the future. But this reality is only part of the complex and ugly domestic violence picture.

An increasing amount of research suggests that women are violent in domestic situations just as often as men. Studies based on large, random samples from the whole population have found domestic violence to be distributed more or less equally between the sexes. These include studies conducted by Dr. Suzanne Steinmetz, director of the Family Research Institute at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, and by Murray Straus and Richard Gelles, who have conducted the large-scale National Family Violence Survey over a period of 17 years; and research by Anson Shupe, William A. Stacey, and Lonnie R. Hazlewood.

The overall pattern depicted by Straus and Gelles is that spousal violence falls into four categories of essentially equal size: male battery of an unresisting female partner; female battery of an unresisting male partner; mutual battery usually initiated by the male; and mutual battery usually initiated by the female.

They found that when only the women's version of events was analyzed (that is, the men's version of events was omitted), the results were the same. When only the most severe forms of violence were analyzed, the results were the same. (In a fist-to-fist row, a bigger, stronger man is obviously far more likely to injure a smaller woman than the reverse. But a man's superior strength is often neutralized by a woman's use of weapons.)

The public has received a dramatically different picture of domestic violence. Other, more widely publicized studies do suggest that women assault their spouses much less frequently than men and rarely or never initiate mutual assaults. But these studies are based on small, self-selected "treatment group" samples or police records and are statistically less likely to measure accurately the overall rate and form of domestic violence.

The rhetoric and reality clash: Our mythic fantasies of a female ideal contradict and undermine the actual strength and multidimensionality of women. In cases where female aggression is destructive, our denial compounds the problem.

In boxing, they say it's the punch you don't see coming that knocks you out. In the wider world, the reality we ignore or deny is the one that weakens our most impassioned efforts toward improvement.

We live with a distinct double standard about male and female aggression. Women's aggression isn't considered real. It isn't dangerous, it's only cute. Or it's always self-defense or otherwise inspired by a man. In the rare case where a woman is seen as genuinely responsible, she is branded a monster—an “unnatural” woman.

But slowly these stereotypes are crumbling. We are starting to realize that, in the words of columnist Linda Ellerbee, “The truth is that women, like it or not, can be brutal, too. Brutality's not sexist.”

I suspect that the mythology of females as essentially non-violent grew out of a profound impulse to give special protection to the bearers of future generations—a sort of gender version of the non-combatant status of medics and Red Cross workers. But the problem is the same for all non-combatants, whether in wartime or danger-ridden peace: You can still get hurt, but you're not allowed to fight back.

Then, too, we humans don't respect victims, and the disrespect in the language of the nonviolent female nature is too familiar. It echoes the chauvinist romances of past male authorities who explained why women needed to be banned from vast sections of the workplace, prevented from learning to read, excluded from doing business or owning property, and relieved of the onerous responsibility of making fundamental decisions about their own lives.

Such rhetoric is absurd in a time when millions of American women are shoulder to shoulder with male colleagues in every field of human endeavor. Women have fought for their achievements over decades, battling in courtrooms, classrooms, legislatures, workshops, and the streets of the nation. It took the ferocious, unconquerable will of a great many women to win recognition for equal intelligence, invention, organization, and stamina.

In the boxing world, that kind of courage is known as heart. Now, with the possibility of genuine equality visible in the distance, it is self-destructive lunacy to deny the existence of women's enormous fighting heart.

It is time to recognize the variability of females, just as we do males. Women are real. Our reality covers the whole human *megillah*, from feeble to fierce, from bad to good, from endangered to dangerous. We don't just deserve power, we have it. And power in this and every other society is not just the capacity to benefit those around us. It includes, absolutely and necessarily, the ability to inflict damage and the willingness to accept responsibility.

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