

# The Representation of Offending Women in the Irish Press: A Content Analysis

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**Summary:** Reductive definitions characterise many of the representations of women in the media. These depictions are frequently built around commonly understood and uncritically accepted gender norms which restrict the range of roles women can inhabit. ‘Offending’ women are particularly vulnerable to such limitations of representation due to their relative invisibility; such women are substantially constructed and understood through media reporting. The operation of this process in Ireland has not been the subject of extensive study; this article presents research on the representation of offending women in Irish newspapers within the context of the existing literature. Through a content analysis of the output of four newspapers over a one-month period, the representation of offending women in Irish newspapers was found to rely on familiar narratives of maternity, sexuality and pathology. In addition to these tropes, issues of ethnicity and nationality were also present, demonstrating the need for an understanding based on intersectionality.

**Keywords:** crime, punishment, criminal justice, women, Ireland, courts, media, newspapers, reporting.

## Introduction

The question of how women are represented has been a recurring theme in feminist writings since the emergence of an invigorated women’s movement in the middle decades of the last century. Taken-for-granted assumptions of what it was to be a woman, and what we understood as appropriately feminine, were subjected to a process of re-examination, creating a rich vein of scholarship on the question of how the concept of ‘woman’ had been constituted (see works such as de Beauvoir, 1949/1997; Greer, 1970).

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Within the discipline of criminology, this new consciousness concerning 'woman' and her role within the criminal justice system led, from the 1970s onwards, to a mould-breaking period of academic feminism. For the first time, women were forming the subjects of a new body of literature. In a welcome and, perhaps, inevitable development, the proponents of these new currents of thought were almost invariably women themselves. This new movement of women academics within criminology and criminal law numbered among their ranks some of the most influential thinkers on the question of women's place within the criminal justice system, writers such as Carol Smart (1977), Pat Carlen (1983), and Susan Edwards (1984).

The question of how women are represented within the criminal justice system therefore presented itself as a natural area of study. The research presented in this article explores the question of how offending women are culturally constructed through media representations. In Ireland, however, there has been little attempt to study the representations of such women. It is argued that a failure to understand how offending women are packaged for public consumption carries with it a fundamental failure to understand how prevailing cultural norms shape the lived experience of offending women, and may obscure larger questions of how social constructions of women are reflected within the criminal justice system.

### **The interplay of media and the criminal justice system**

The media is a ubiquitous feature of contemporary life, providing knowledge of events otherwise unseen by much of the public; from depictions of foreign conflicts, to high-stakes political wrangling to the vagaries of a celebrity culture. Crucially, the media also act as a conduit for stories about crime. Crime remains, for many persons, a phenomenon much spoken about but little experienced. Crime therefore constitutes a dependable ratio of media output by satisfying the 'news values' of immediacy, human interest and atypicality; for example, within the hierarchical ranking imposed by 'news values', violent crime generates more column inches than shoplifting, due to the rarity of one over the other (Galtung and Ruge, 1973; Jewkes, 2011). The preponderance of depictions of crime and the criminal justice system has facilitated scholarship on the nature and possible consequences of this

representation, and has raised questions of the nature of the relationship between the representation and that which is represented.

There is little Irish research on the reporting of criminal justice issues in the media. To date, the most exhaustive analysis of media and crime in Ireland was conducted by Michael O'Connell (1999); O'Connell sampled four Irish newspapers over a two-month period, and presented four key findings drawn from over 2,000 articles which dealt with crime. His findings adhere to the existing research on 'news values' and the media's preference for more serious crimes. He found that atypical crimes were more newsworthy, with a disproportionate number of stories about crimes of violence; further, he found that these extreme crimes generated greater 'wordage'. In addition to skewing by *type* of crime, O'Connell also noted a tendency for the victim/offender profile to become relevant, invulnerable offenders and vulnerable victims providing the most popular pairing. Finally, general articles, written at a 'meta' level from the criminal event, tended to present a pessimistic view of crime and the criminal justice system.

The presence of so much crime content in the media has generated much scholarship on the possible consequences of this on public and official understandings of crime, for example in the work of Hall *et al.* (1977) which demonstrated the very real and tangible effects that representation could exert on criminal justice policy. Through their analysis of the 'mugging' phenomenon which occurred in England in the early 1970s, Hall *et al.* pinpointed the media response as pivotal to the transference of the meaning of 'mugging' from the United States and the resultant mobilisation of a government response which was in disproportion to the threat. In Ireland, the interplay of criminal justice policy-making and media portrayals of crime has also been the subject of scrutiny, particularly in the wake of the 1996 murders of Garda Jerry McCabe and investigative journalist Veronica Guerin which sparked crises-led policy innovation and a media rush to diagnose a country overrun with gangland crime (Meade, 2000; Hamilton, 2005).

These works have demonstrated that representations of criminal justice issues have concrete impacts on perception, policy and people. Demonstrating such effects, Paul Mason (2006) has argued that the punitiveness which led to changing imprisonment rates in England and Wales was underpinned and reinforced by a punitive turn in the media. Similarly, feminist criminologists have cautioned that atypical and

sensationalist depictions of offending women can foment and rationalise harsher responses to such women. Dawn Cecil (2007) has argued that ‘get tough’ policies are often successful because of the habit of presenting skewed and sensationalised accounts of crimes committed by women. The converse of this, often branded as ‘chivalry’,<sup>2</sup> is that women are treated more leniently if they conform to normative expectations (Worrall, 1990; Quinlan, 2011).

The cohort of offending women is small in comparison to that of offending men; their population is little seen and, for many in society, little interacted with. This renders offending women particularly vulnerable to misleading representation in the media and such representation can harm an already vulnerable group (Carlen, 1983; Quinlan, 2011). The offences for which women are typically convicted bear little resemblance to those depicted in media accounts (Heidensohn, 1996; Chesney-Lind and Pasko, 2004). Women’s violence in the media provides a point of fascination, creating ‘compelling images of crime and deviance’ (Heidensohn, 1996, p. 86).

### **Understanding offending women**

Stereotypes transmit complex ideas in simple forms; stereotypes are therefore a crucial mechanism through which the media convey messages (Barrat, 1986). The shared understanding within a culture allows these ideas to pass back and forth. Stereotypes about women carry assumptions about women’s expected roles and behaviours, which are in turn reflected in the media treatment of offending women.

For example, Anne Worrall (1990) identified the use of concepts of domesticity, pathology and sexuality to categorise the conceptualisation of women used by criminal justice personnel in courtrooms. Bronwyn Naylor (1995) also offered a typology of short-hand terminologies deployed in understanding violent women: Madonna/whore; sexual passion as a motivation; reproduction and madness; figure of evil; criminal woman as ‘non-woman’; female manipulation. Underlying these stereotypes are fundamental assumptions of appropriate femininity, or ‘the eternal feminine’ (de Beauvoir, 1949/1997); deviation from appropriate femininity is punished under the ‘gender contract’ which only awards

<sup>2</sup> The concept of ‘chivalry’ is most associated with Otto Pollak (1961) *The Criminality of Women*, New York: AS Barnes.

leniency where the requisite threshold of 'womanhood' is met (Worrall, 1990). Offending women are therefore portrayed as 'doubly deviant', contravening both the law and gender expectations (Heidensohn, 1996).

In her research on the representation of women who killed abusive partners, Maggie Wykes (2001) noted how the demonisation of women resolved the tension between assumptions of appropriate feminine behaviour and violence perpetrated by women; Wykes' research explored the media response to killings committed by women in abusive relationships and the intense media interest in these cases in the early-1990s in England. However, as Seal (2010, pp. 1–2) has argued, female-perpetrated violence within the context of intimate partner abuse is 'not a culturally unthinkable use of violence by women'.

In Ireland, Nicola Carr and Stephanie Holt (2010) provided a qualitative analysis of one of O'Connell's (1999) key findings, namely, that the media exhibit a preference for vulnerable victims and invulnerable offenders. Their research presented findings on the representation of victims of femicide in Ireland, as depicted in newspapers. Even in the context of women as victims of crime, however, they found that those women without appropriate femininity were judged harshly for their perceived 'deviation'. They cite particularly the case of Jean Gilbert, killed by her husband, David Bourke, in 2007. The individual-level features of this case were emphasised at the expense of a discussion which could have encompassed a more critical conversation about male violence against women. Drawing on the output of four Irish newspapers, they highlighted Bourke's defence of 'outrageous provocation', understood as Gilbert's extra-marital relationship and decision to leave her husband following twelve years of marriage. The brutality of the injuries inflicted on Jean Gilbert by David Bourke was eclipsed by the print media search for an answer as to why a seemingly happy woman would leave her husband. The judge, in his charge to the jury, felt compelled to caution that they must judge according to the law, and not Gilbert's perceived 'moral failings' (quoted at p. 280). Even within O'Connell's (1999) findings that vulnerable victims are more newsworthy therefore, the research from Carr and Holt suggests that these 'high-status' victims are also subject to *degrees* of sympathy. Women seemingly remove themselves from patriarchal protection when they express autonomy, sexuality or defiance.

In Ireland there have been few attempts to comprehend the portrayal of offending women in the media. O'Connell (2002) has claimed that

despite some high-profile examples, murder cases with female offenders and male victims were less newsworthy. Within his sample, there were 156 stories in which the sex of the victim and the offender was known and a calculation of the mean wordage of the articles suggested that the vulnerable victim/invulnerable offender combination attracted most journalistic interest. O'Connell wrote that the high levels of interest in a selection of female-perpetrated murder was not the norm, and could have been sparked by the sexualisation of the woman. However, the low number of murders committed by women renders this measure an ineffective means of analysing newspaper reporting. Instead, the use of in-depth qualitative analysis of case studies could present more meaningful findings. Further, O'Connell's nod to the sexualisation of the women in these cases itself provides a glimpse at the differential representation of offending behaviour by women.

Catherine O'Sullivan's (2008) analysis of the print media response to the case of Nora Wall is instructive and provides an incisive exploration of the case.<sup>3</sup> O'Sullivan critiqued the stereotypical assumptions about women which pervaded reporting of the Wall case:

These assumptions are that real women are not violent, that real women are by nature maternal and nurturing, and that real women are heterosexual and sexually unadventurous. The sum of such discourse is that criminal women are aberrations. (O'Sullivan, 2008, p. 306)

O'Sullivan contended that the sexual nature of the crimes of which Nora Wall was accused allowed her to be portrayed as masculine and possessed of a dangerous sexuality. Christina Quinlan (2011), in her work on women's imprisonment in Ireland, has argued that women in prison are substantially understood through media discourses. Quinlan writes that prison:

served to render the women visible and vulnerable to the press. Women prisoners have no defence against the scrutiny of the press. In addition, women prisoners have no other public representation. (Quinlan, 2011, p. 165)

In April 2010, Kathleen McMahon retired from her post as Governor of the Dóchas Centre in Dublin; in a subsequent interview with the *Irish*

<sup>3</sup> Nora Wall was convicted of rape and sexual assault in 1999. That same year her conviction was quashed and in 2005 she was given a certificate of leave to sue the state for miscarriage of justice.

*Times* she criticised the inaccurate and harmful reporting of women prisoners within the facility. McMahon reiterated the weight media reporting carried, especially when such reports targeted vulnerable women: 'If people have no connection with the prison system, they believe what is written in those papers' (Sheridan, 2010). McMahon highlighted the strain evident in many articles, particularly those from the popular press, which flagged as frivolous the use of 'pampering' facilities to train women prisoners in beauty skills. She was also particularly critical of the sexualisation of the women prisoners.

Kathleen McMahon's criticisms of the Irish press support Heidensohn's (1996) assertions about the appeal of stories of offending women. Within the Irish market, for example, the popularity of true crime titles has demonstrated the appeal of the macabre, and within this genre, a fascination with the figure of the violent woman is evident in the range of titles devoted to this sub-genre.<sup>4</sup>

In 2014, an alternative portrayal of women in prison was shown on RTÉ in the two-part documentary 'Women on the Inside' (Midas Productions, 2014). The documentary provoked critical reflection on both the conditions of women's imprisonment and its purpose. However, such depictions remain anomalous.

## Research

In order to more fully explore the question of how offending women were portrayed in the Irish media, an analysis was conducted of the output of four newspapers over a one-month period in June 2009. Newspapers, rather than television or radio, provide a greater depth of understanding due to the proportionately larger range and detail in stories reported in the print media (Wykes, 2001). Irish newspaper readership is also one of the highest in Europe (Elvestad and Blekesaune, 2008). In order to capture a representative sample the newspapers selected covered both tabloid, popular and broadsheet titles: the *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent*, *Evening Herald* and the *Irish Daily Star*. Within these four newspapers, all stories which made reference to women's

<sup>4</sup> See for example: David M Kiely, *Bloody Women: Ireland's Female Killers* (Gill and Macmillan, 1999); Niamh O'Connor, *The Black Widow: The Catherine Nevin Story* (O'Brien, 2000); Liz Walsh, *The People Vs Catherine Nevin* (Gill and Macmillan, 2000); David M Kiely, *Deadlier than the Male: Ireland's Female Killers* (Gill & Macmillan, 2005); Anthony Galvin, *The Cruellest Cut: Irish Women who Kill* (Gill and Macmillan, 2009); Mick McCaffrey, *The Irish Scissor Sisters* (Y Books, 2011).

participation in crime were included: encompassing items dealing with the arrest, charging, conviction or imprisonment of a woman in an Irish or international context. Each of the four newspapers from Monday to Saturday was included within the sample. From Monday to Friday each provided a daily edition, on Saturdays there was an *Irish Daily Star*, an *Irish Times*, an *Irish Independent* and a *Weekend Herald*. This provided an equal number of titles. Twenty-six days were therefore covered, which totalled 104 newspapers.

In total, 234 articles were found to come within the terms outlined above. Of these articles, only two provided what could be termed analysis or extended commentary, and the vast majority of references to offending women were either fleeting or were characterised as 'straight' reporting which did not engage in further discussion. This manner of crime-reporting is standard, as Reiner (2007) has elaborated, the format for crime items in newspapers emphasises a concentration on the discrete criminal event, and is packaged without further discussion.

## Findings

An analysis of the breakdown of stories according to newspaper showed that the highest concentration of articles relating to offending women was in the *Irish Daily Star* which accounted for 35 per cent of all articles. The *Evening Herald* and *Irish Independent* had a similar proportion (24.4 per cent and 26.6 per cent respectively), while the *Irish Times* had the fewest with 17.9 per cent. Once again, this finding is in line with existing research which has underlined the particular interest in crime shown by the tabloid press. The popular press, most particularly tabloids, report on crime at a higher rate than does the quality or broadsheet press (Dahlgren, 1992). The *Irish Times* featured the fewest articles relating to offending women.

In the complete sample of newspapers, the number of *general* crime-related articles was also noted. Of these 1,604 articles, 369 related to female victims of crime. Naylor (2001) found during her research into four British national dailies a marked preference for female victims with almost half of all crime stories featuring a female victim; women become crime news more often as victims than offenders. This can be related to O'Connell's (1999) findings which demonstrated a preference for vulnerable victims. The difference between newspaper titles was again evident in relation to a breakdown of the general crime-related articles. The tabloid *Irish Daily Star* featured the highest concentration with

34.7 per cent of all crime-related articles, the *Irish Times* had 20.7 per cent of the articles, while the *Irish Independent* and the *Evening Herald* contained 19.3 per cent and 25.3 per cent respectively.

Beyond what could be gleaned from the fall-out of articles between newspapers, a more in-depth analysis was conducted of articles relating to offending women. The language used in the headlines was analysed, which provided a key means of ascertaining how each newspaper approached the issue of packaging their articles. Referential headlines, those which went beyond the purely informative and contained some element of further descriptor such as references to a woman as a mother, were much more prevalent in the tabloid press. Of all headlines in the sample of 234 articles relating to women offenders, 38.1 per cent of the referential headlines were found in the *Irish Daily Star*. In the *Irish Independent* and the *Evening Herald*, the numbers were 27.8 per cent and 25.8 per cent respectively, while the *Irish Times* had 8.2 per cent.

Martin Conboy (2006), in his writing on tabloid culture in Britain, noted that headlines are an important element of tabloid reporting, crafted to entice the reader. A thematic reading of these referential headlines demonstrated further the marked prevalence of reference to a woman's maternal status. If a woman was a mother this was very rarely omitted from the tabloid headlines. In a similar vein, maternal roles, such as nurse, were also included where relevant in tabloid reporting.

There was a notable use of informal language in certain newspapers, most pronounced in the *Irish Daily Star*. There was frequent use of terms such as 'rap', to mean charge, 'cops' and 'mum'. However, there was a certain amount of this informal language in the *Evening Herald* and *Irish Independent* as well. It was noticed that while headlines may exhibit informal terms, the body of the article was more likely to adhere to formal terms such as 'mother'. Headlines typically, within the *Irish Daily Star* especially, contained sensationalist elements, but were frequently followed by more sedate writing in the article, further underlining the importance of sensationalist headlines within the Irish tabloid market.

The *Irish Daily Star* typically used references to indicate a female offender, such as 'Death Angel',<sup>5</sup> 'Syringe teen'<sup>6</sup> or 'Psycho mum'.<sup>7</sup> The *Irish Daily Star* was also the newspaper which used the most emotive

<sup>5</sup> 'Nurse "killed hundreds of patients"', *Irish Daily Star*, 3 June 2009.

<sup>6</sup> 'Syringe teen to be arrested', *Irish Daily Star*, 4 June 2009.

<sup>7</sup> 'Womb slasher on murder charge', *Irish Daily Star*, 10 June 2009.

adjectives within articles: 'stomach-churning abuse' and 'sickening abuse charges'.<sup>8</sup> This seems to disabuse the notion of dispassionate reporting; the language was highly charged and intended to echo the views of the reader.

The category of crime which was most often reported in the sample corresponded with expectations derived from an understanding of 'news values'. The crime of murder was by a considerable margin the most prevalent among the sample and 83 of 234 articles dealt with this offence. The incidence of articles relating to murder in the 2009 newspaper sample was compared with the prison committals for women in 2008. These figures showed that there were no women committed to prison for murder in 2008 (Irish Prison Service, 2009). From these same figures, we can see that those crimes which women were being sent to prison for, such as road traffic offences and theft, were vastly under-represented within newspaper reporting. For example, in 2008 there were 148 committals for theft, representing 21 per cent of all prison committals for women, however theft offences accounted for only 8.1 per cent of the newspaper sample. Road-traffic offences constituted 29.1 per cent of 2008 prison committals for women but constituted less than 2 per cent of the newspaper sample. These findings accord with earlier research which found a preference for those crimes which were more extreme and less common to form the bulk of media reporting (O'Connell, 1999).

### **Thematic analysis**

A thematic analysis of articles was also undertaken which demonstrated the prevalence of representation which reflected aspects of appropriate femininity and deviation from same. Themes of motherhood, ideal womanhood, sexuality and pathology were evident. The differential reporting of women according to ethnicity and nationality was also evident, incorporating the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) has emerged as a means of explaining the forces at play when multiple elements of identity are incorporated into understandings of discrimination.

#### *Maternity and ideal womanhood*

The most prominent theme to emerge from a thematic analysis was that of maternity. Where possible, articles tended to view offending women

<sup>8</sup> 'Crèche woman on paedo raps', *Irish Daily Star*, 12 June 2009.

through the prism of motherhood, referring to the women as ‘mum’ or ‘mother’. Headlines such as ‘Mum accused of murdering lover’<sup>9</sup> were common; in this case it was also noted that the killing took place the day following the christening of the couple’s child. The juxtaposition of this detail of the christening with the violence perpetrated by the woman towards her ‘lover’ (another example of a meaningful term suggestive of deviant sexuality) hints at a rupturing in the accepted ways of being a woman and of being a mother. Normative assumptions of maternity were evident throughout the sample. There is a socially constructed and ideal way of being a ‘mother’; in accordance with this idealised standard of motherhood there was greater censure shown to those women who directly harmed children. The reference ‘Psycho mum’ was typical of the demonisation of such offenders; in the headline, ‘Psycho mum “cut baby boy” from tragic young friend’<sup>10</sup> predatory ‘false’ motherhood is contrasted with the tragic motherhood of the victim. Another headline read ‘Knife attack mother caged’, alluding to the woman as a dangerous animal.

However, motherhood was not used solely to stigmatise; it could also mitigate culpability in cases where the woman could be shown to be acting in the best interests of her child. There were a number of articles covering the case of a woman convicted of stealing clothes for her children; these articles consistently represented the woman in a sympathetic fashion. One article opened with the line:

A mum-of-four raising her children alone after her husband left her for another woman has been ordered to do 240 hours community service for stealing children’s clothes valued at €16 ....<sup>11</sup>

The trivial monetary value of the clothes is contrasted with the sentence severity to suggest absurdity. Throughout the sample it was noted that a woman’s status as a mother could be included to inspire sympathy, such as in the headline: ‘Mother imprisoned despite selling home to reduce debt’.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> ‘Mum accused of murdering lover’, *Irish Independent*, 2 June 2009.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Womb slasher on murder charge: Psycho mum “cut baby boy” from tragic young friend’, *Irish Daily Star*, 10 June 2009.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Mum stole €16 of clothes for her kids’, *Evening Herald*, 20 June 2009.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Woman who stole €98,000 from GAA club jailed: Mother imprisoned despite selling home to reduce debt’, *Irish Times*, 10 June 2009.

The theme of motherhood was inextricably linked with the theme of ideal womanhood. Analysis of the articles suggested that those women who conformed to expectations of femininity were more likely to be viewed with compassion. There were many references to these women's good nature, typically made by defence counsel, for example, one woman was reported to be 'involved with her church'.<sup>13</sup> However, the converse was also true and there were many examples of women being demonised because of behaviour deemed inappropriate.

The trial of Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito for the murder of Meredith Kercher in Italy was on-going during the period the sample was drawn from. The reporting of Amanda Knox demonstrated that adverse judgements could be made about women who deviated from appropriate behaviour. One article reported how Knox 'giggled in the witness box',<sup>14</sup> which was in stark contrast to those articles which reported female offenders who 'broke down in tears'<sup>15</sup> or 'wept outside the courtroom'.<sup>16</sup> One headline read 'Witness box: confident American accused of murder coolly tells her side of the story – in rapid-fire Italian';<sup>17</sup> Knox's composure was cited as an indicator of her guilt and her confidence was represented as callousness.

### *Sexuality*

The sexualisation of offending women within the press reporting was also evident. For example, descriptions of what female offenders wore were common and a focus on the physical appearance of the women seemed to characterise many of the articles.

Sexuality was also portrayed as potentially dangerous; the reference to one woman as 'Lesbian ex-nun'<sup>18</sup> appeared to demonise the woman and was laden with negative connotations. The woman's sexuality was offered as an indicator of her moral guilt.

A prurient interest in the sex lives of female offenders was a prevalent and insidious feature of the articles. It was common for violent and other

<sup>13</sup> 'Mum of four went off rails after health scare', *Evening Herald*, 8 June 2009.

<sup>14</sup> 'Foxy Knoxy: sex, drugs & my 7 lovers', *Irish Daily Star*, 13 June 2009.

<sup>15</sup> 'Mum jailed for year after she stole €98,000 from GAA club', *Irish Independent*, 10 June 2009; 'Mother admits killing son', *Evening Herald*, 8 June 2009; 'Fire families feel for lying garda', *Evening Herald*, 17 June 2009.

<sup>16</sup> '€100k fraud woman jailed', *Irish Daily Star*, 4 June 2009.

<sup>17</sup> 'I took a shower and slipped on Meredith's blood – Foxy Knoxy', *Evening Herald*, 13 June 2009.

<sup>18</sup> 'Lesbian ex-nun's anger at Ryan Report accusations', *Irish Daily Star*, 1 June 2009.

serious crimes to be reported from an angle which most exploited the sexual element. One story, reported in numerous articles, detailed the trial of a woman charged with murdering her partner. The woman was variously referred to as ‘S&M mistress’, ‘dominatix’ and ‘modern-day courtesan’.<sup>19</sup> The case was viewed primarily through the sexuality of the woman.

In the case of Samantha O, media attention focused on her when it emerged she had become pregnant while in prison. Articles fixated on the logistics of how she had become pregnant and the tone of reporting became increasingly prurient as articles providing details of the ‘sperm donor’ and ‘sperm-filled syringe’ escalated.<sup>20</sup>

The case of Amanda Knox again illustrated the highly salacious reporting of women’s sexuality. The sexual elements of the story were emphasised in headlines. Both the *Evening Herald* and the *Irish Daily Star* refer to her as ‘Foxy Knoxy’. The most extreme headline among the articles appeared in the *Irish Daily Star*, ‘Foxy Knoxy: sex, drugs & my 7 lovers’.<sup>21</sup> An *Evening Herald* article reports, ‘Knox grinned sheepishly when describing a mark on her neck as ‘a hickey, from Raffaele’;<sup>22</sup> this reporting was typical, illustrated further by the use of sub-headings within articles such as ‘kissed’ and ‘lovers’ which could be employed as a guide for how to ‘read’ the article.<sup>23</sup>

### *Pathology*

Within the sample, 11.1 per cent of articles included pathological explanations for the woman’s offending incorporating issues such as depression, manic-depression, and schizophrenia, as well as mental health issues related to the female reproductive system, for example in the case of one woman accused of murder who had ‘a contraceptive device fitted into her arm a month before the murder which ... can cause heightened levels of aggression through the release of hormones.’<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> ‘Crime of passion: Tycoon blasted four times in whipping session’, *Evening Herald*, 11 June 2009; ‘Billionaire banker’s lover found guilty of murder’, *Irish Times*, 18 June 2009.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Drug suspect’s “DIY pregnancy”’, *Irish Daily Star*, 3 June 2009; ‘Jail liaison saved drug girl from firing squad’, *Irish Independent*, 8 June 2009.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Foxy Knoxy: sex, drugs & my 7 lovers’, *Irish Daily Star*, 13 June 2009.

<sup>22</sup> ‘I took a shower and slipped on Meredith’s blood – Foxy Knoxy’, *Evening Herald*, 13 June 2009.

<sup>23</sup> ‘I took a shower and slipped on Meredith’s blood – Foxy Knoxy’, *Evening Herald*, 13 June 2009.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Woman accused of killing lover gets bail’, *Irish Times*, 2 June 2009.

However, pathological explanations were not universally accepted within reporting. To illustrate this are two contrasting articles reporting the case of a woman charged with killing her new-born infants which demonstrated a spectrum of legitimacy for pathological explanations. In the first article, in the *Irish Daily Star*, the woman is referred to as ‘the killer mum’.<sup>25</sup> However, in the *Irish Times* article, the nature of the psychological issue was outlined and the woman was described as having a face ‘streaked with tears’.<sup>26</sup>

Again the difference in tone according to newspaper is evident. In the *Irish Daily Star*, the article was condemnatory and punitive, which can be contrasted with the sympathetic approach taken by the *Irish Times*.

The pathologisation of offending women can diminish the censure they experience, however it can also lead to the diminution of their agency and the imposition of victimhood. Through the application of psychological explanations, an offending woman can herself become the victim. For example, in the case of Cecile B who was convicted for the manslaughter of her partner, widespread sympathy was evident in many articles reporting the case, which was evident in lines such as ‘the uneducated woman who was described by expert witnesses as mentally fragile’.<sup>27</sup> A number of distinctive strands of reporting were noted throughout articles on the case: the narrative proposed by the prosecution was reported, that of a coldly calculating woman, another narrative told of a woman driven to commit a crime of passion, and finally the depiction of Cecile B as a victim. Each of these narratives can be related to tropes common to the reporting of offending women, for example within Naylor’s (1995) typologies which included woman as devious manipulator, sexual passion/love as motivation, and the mad-woman. A pathological explanation was most evident in the *Irish Times* reporting, which emphasised both the victimisation experienced by Cecile B in her early life as well as the allegations of cruelty within the relationship. In this manner, the ‘blurred boundaries’ between victimisation and offending behaviour in women can be illustrated. Victimisation is a contentious issue when considered in reference to agency, or the degree of ownership which is attributed to one’s actions. Hilary Allen (1998) argued that pathologising offending women could ‘render them harmless’ and her work demonstrated the pathologised lens

<sup>25</sup> ‘Freezer baby mum gets eight years’, *Irish Daily Star*, 19 June 2009.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Macabre secret of a shy wife’, *Irish Times*, 20 June 2009.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Tycoon’s lover faces 20 years for murder’, *Irish Independent*, 18 June 2009.

through which criminal justice and medical professionals *and* feminist criminologists tended to view such women. Pathology neutralised the moral culpability of offending women because they could no longer be said to have ownership of their actions. However, Anne Worrall (1990) has noted that exculpation grounded in pathology is not offered to all women equally; rather women are afforded differential use of pathology depending on factors such as class. The application of a pathological explanation can resolve the tension noted by Worrall (1990) in relation to ‘criminal women’, who must either be re-categorised as either ‘not criminal’ or ‘not women’ – pathological explanations can rebrand a woman as ‘not criminal’.

### *Ethnicity and ‘othering’*

Evident in the research also was a disproportionate focus on offences committed by young women from the Roma community, particularly in the *Irish Daily Star* and *Evening Herald*. Further, the offences for which these young women had been convicted were all minor offences, such as theft, trespass and administrative infractions regarding documentation. This suggests that offences committed by women from the Roma community are much more likely to become news, and that these offences are therefore more newsworthy. The fact of over-reporting of such offences within the *Irish Daily Star* and *Evening Herald* is indicative of an ‘othering’ of women from this community; the ethnicity of the women was of greater importance than the offence, ensuring newsworthiness regardless of other features.<sup>28</sup>

The issue of ethnicity rose again in another story concerning a young woman, Samantha O, which was covered in seven articles within the sample. Samantha O was a young black British woman, imprisoned in Laos following conviction on drug charges. Irish interest in this story derived from the fact that Samantha O’s mother was Irish; in each article her mother was linked to Trinity College Dublin. However, the manner in which this link was made differed across newspapers. The articles in the *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent* and *Evening Herald* referred to Samantha O’s mother as a student of Trinity College Dublin, while one article in

<sup>28</sup> See for example ‘Judge’s child sex warning’, *Irish Daily Star*, 13 June 2009; ‘Girl “failed to produce ID”’, *Irish Daily Star*, 17 June 2009; ‘City centre ban for teen mum’, *Evening Herald*, 18 June 2009; ‘Pregnant girl at risk, says judge’, *Evening Herald*, 18 June 2009; ‘Teen remanded on bail’, *Irish Daily Star*, 25 June 2009; ‘Girl trespassed at OAP’s home’, *Evening Herald*, 26 June 2009.

the *Irish Daily Star* reported that she ‘works at Trinity College’.<sup>29</sup> This carried a qualitatively different meaning. Further, Samantha O was referred to in the *Irish Daily Star* as ‘Nigerian-born’ while her mother was referenced as an ‘Irish citizen’ both of which created a nuance of description not evident across articles in the other three newspapers.<sup>30</sup> These differences suggest a pre-occupation with nationality suggestive of the fact that while Samantha O and her mother may *now* be British and Irish respectively, they were not always so. The language used in the reporting of this particular news event again emphasised difference and ‘otherness’.

In contrast to the depiction of Samantha O as ‘other’ in the *Irish Daily Star*, another article also in the *Irish Daily Star*, demonstrated a signally different tone. Sarah E was a young white Irish woman, convicted of drug offences in Spain and sentenced to imprisonment. The article on this woman throughout stressed that the imprisonment of Sarah E was unwarranted: ‘young Irish woman has been locked up in a Spanish prison for three years – for possessing cocaine worth just €50’. The sympathies of the article are with Sarah E, who is described as ‘pretty’, while quotes from those who know her state that she ‘is not a drug user’.<sup>31</sup>

Categories such as gender, race, sexuality and class are all key means of defining identity. At the interstices of these categories, differential responses and stereotypes operate and within the current research, findings on ethnicity and nationality emerged which demonstrated this. As Crenshaw (1989, p. 139) noted, race and gender are not ‘mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis’, and discrimination rarely occurs along a single-category axis.

## Conclusion

Christina Quinlan has characterised the Irish press reporting of offending women as yet another ‘instrument of social control’ (2011, p. 196). The research presented herein provides further support for the thesis that newspaper depictions of offending women use well-worn tropes to categorise and judge the women according to their adherence to normative gender roles. The findings from the present study have demonstrated the reductive stereotypes applied to offending women in

<sup>29</sup> ‘Pregnant Laos lifer names dad of child as Brit inmate’, *Irish Daily Star*, 8 June 2009.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Pregnant Laos lifer names dad of child as Brit inmate’, *Irish Daily Star*, 8 June 2009.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Irish girl jailed for 3 years over €50 of cocaine’, *Irish Daily Star*, 23 June 2009.

the Irish press which cluster around maternity, sexuality and pathology; in addition to this, the issue of the 'othering' of women of colour and according to ethnicity was also noted. Many of the stereotypical representations found within the sample are derived from gendered notions of appropriateness and 'natural' femininity. Offending women were constructed around a binary of 'good' and 'bad', a framework underpinned by the organising principle of appropriate femininity. The default was the 'good' woman, epitomised by the good mother, the good wife, and the caring woman. Deviation from this standard created a 'bad' woman. As Kathleen McMahon noted on her departure from the Dóchas Centre, one-dimensional and sexualised reporting of women in prison can have detrimental effects on the lives of these women; it is argued that these detrimental effects also extend beyond the prison, reinforcing societal stereotypes which diminish all women.

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