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# How violent were women? Court cases in Amsterdam, 1650-1810<sup>1</sup>

Pieter Spierenburg

In his «Black Register of a Thousand Sins» of 1679, Jacobus Hondius, minister at Hoorn, indeed discusses exactly 1000 sins. Many are committed by specific categories of people. Sin nr. 970 involves «such women, who are members [of the Reformed Church] and nevertheless do not refrain from fighting and flinging publicly and to tear the cap from the head». This behavior is a disgrace upon the community: «as men are not allowed to be fighters, ... much less are women»<sup>2</sup>. The first of the quoted sentences sounds a little awkward, but it has been translated literally on purpose: Hondius' formulation can refer to women who attack persons of either sex, but it is clear, especially from the reference to removing someone's cap, that he primarily thinks of inter-female fights<sup>3</sup>. No doubt, he shared the judgment, that it was especially unbecoming for women to fight, with many of his contemporaries. Did Hondius find female violence also uncommon? We cannot infer this from the fact that it is one of the last sins he discusses; that is merely a consequence of the alphabetical order of his book. But we may take the harmlessness of the one concrete act he cites to mean that he considered *serious* female violence uncommon.

Like Hondius, historians have found female aggression to be uncommon. When the title of a publication has the words «women» and «violence» in it, the focus is often on women as victims rather than as perpetrators. Historians as well as criminologists have paid ample attention to male-on-female crime. Alternatively, typically female offenses have been studied, such as, for the period under discussion here, infanticide. These two perspectives are frequently combined. For example, in an overview article entitled «Women and Violence in Early Modern Europe» two third of the text is devoted to a discussion of infanticide, wife-beating and rape<sup>4</sup>. This emphasis on victimization and special offenses is understandable, since the subject of women and violence leaves few other choices. Every quantitative study available tells us that among prosecutions for homicide and assault women constitute a tiny minority.

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper at the meeting of the Social Science History Association, Chicago, November 1995. I am grateful to the participants in the session and to Manon van der Heijden for their comments. I also profited from the comments of the anonymous reviewers, who reviewed the article for CHS.

<sup>2</sup> Hondius (1679, p. 436). Fighting in general, which implicitly means by men, is condemned as sin nr. 915 (*ibidem*, p. 415).

<sup>3</sup> Removing a woman's headdress was a shaming ritual practiced in several parts of Europe at the time. See Farr (1991) and Mohrmann (1977, p. 237-238, 278 (note 55)).

<sup>4</sup> Hufton (1990).

However, the uncommon is worth studying in its own right. This article originated from a recalcitrant stand. Considering the story of women as victims too familiar, I asked myself instead «can I find serious female violence, despite the odds»? The emphasis here is on the word «serious». I am not primarily interested in a few scratches, a slap in the face or pulling hair. The search is not for the stereotypical female fury, but for the limits of the historically possible. This means a study of a limited number of individual cases. As Walker and Kermode argue, the emphasis on aggregate rates often obscures women's crime-related activities<sup>5</sup>. Before turning to female violence, however, I will briefly discuss aggregate rates, as far as they pertain to women's share in total crime. This discussion is necessary, in order to differentiate between violence and other offenses and to consider the validity of theories based in biology.

Some historians use a rather broad definition of violence. Verbal injury, scolding and other words meant to hurt are often categorized as «verbal violence». While this may solve the problem of categorization, it is confusing from a linguistic standpoint. Verbal injuries are no encroachments upon a person's physical integrity, so they are not violence. They may lead to violence though, and they certainly are an important source for the study of honor. However, violence is understood here as any act of physical attack, ranging from a slap to stabbing someone to death. When the emphasis is on the emotional component of this behavior, the term «aggression» is appropriate. This is not to say that I believe that humans have a fixed amount of «innate» aggression, partly expressed and partly repressed or sublimated. Aggression may be defined simply as the propensity to attack; aggressive behavior is behavior aimed at attacking another person. As I have argued elsewhere, infanticide hardly belongs to the sphere of aggression and attack, so that it should be kept separate from the study of interpersonal violence<sup>6</sup>. For the rest, all cases in which women were tried primarily for violent behavior (as opposed to morals or property offenses, etc.), will be explored. Because my main interest is in serious violence, I am using the records of the regular Amsterdam court, rather than lower tribunals dealing with minor conflicts.

Although the notion of an innate aggression was rejected, the question of biological factors -or nature vs. nurture, as it is often put- must receive further attention. The near-universality of women's low involvement in violent crime would suggest that biology somehow plays a role here. Nevertheless, most historians come out at the side of «nurture». So does Andrew Finch in a recent study of women and violence in medieval Normandy. Because a few women were indeed engaged in serious assault, he argues, this makes a social or cultural explanation of the lesser female involvement in violent crime more plausible than a biological one<sup>7</sup>. The implicit idea is that the connection between physical constitution and behavior must be automatic: for a biological explanation to be valid, no woman committing serious violence ought to be found. However, I doubt whether this kind of «either-or» thinking brings us much further.

<sup>5</sup> See their introduction to Kermode and Walker (1994, p. 4).

<sup>6</sup> Spierenburg (1996, p. 72-73). The Amsterdam court tried only a handful of cases of infanticide anyway. Trials for giving birth to a dead baby without calling a midwife were slightly more frequent. Obviously, this offense cannot be defined as violence at all. In her contribution to Ulbricht (1995, p. 314) Silke Götsch also excludes infanticide from a discussion of female violence.

<sup>7</sup> Finch (1992, p. 38).

A more adequate approach is to be found in Norbert Elias' views on human emotions<sup>8</sup>. According to him, the opposition of «nature vs. nurture» is a false contrast. Biology is involved in the emotions of all animals. What varies is the degree to which emotional behavior depends on learning. In human emotions, in contrast to the behavior of other animals, learned ways have become dominant over unlearned ways. As a consequence, even some unlearned forms of behavior have lost their genetic rigidity. This applies just as much to aggressive emotions. The violence of human males and females is dependent on learning to a much greater extent than that of male and female chimpanzees. Indeed, the amount and character of violence among men have varied greatly throughout history. The homicide rate, for which men were mainly responsible, has strongly declined since the middle ages and has increased again in recent times. Moreover, the forms and content of male violence have always been strongly shaped by cultural expectations. This is less clear in the case of violence among women. We may inquire, however, whether the modest amount of female violence we know about is also shaped by historical circumstances. For example, in groups with much male-female contact, did women imitate male forms of aggression? If so, this would lend credibility to the thesis that learned ways are dominant over unlearned ways in women's violence-related behavior.

### GENDER, CRIME AND VIOLENCE

The notion of a dominance of learned ways may be clarified by looking at women's involvement in crimes other than violence. Earlier biological theories often posited a relationship between women's physical constitution and their share in criminality as a whole. However, women's involvement in total crime shows a much greater variation over time than their involvement in violence.

In the modern world, female crime rarely rises above 10%. Figures were higher in preindustrial times. It used to be common wisdom that women tended to account for about one fifth of the defendants in criminal cases then. This conclusion was mainly based on English and French studies, which concentrated on the eighteenth century<sup>9</sup>. In the meantime, Dutch historians had come up with still higher figures for women's involvement in total criminality. Investigating the Amsterdam court records in the second half of the 1970s, I found that the ratio of female crime in that city approached 50% at times, between the middle of the seventeenth century and the middle of the eighteenth<sup>10</sup>. Although this figure included typically female offenses as prostitution and child abandonment, the majority of women were prosecuted for theft or smuggling. Other Dutch scholars also found that the female involvement in crime in the Dutch Republic was much above one fifth. In Delft, for example, it was 36% between 1591 and 1810<sup>11</sup>. This picture is confirmed in a recent study by Manon van der Heijden<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Elias (1991).

<sup>9</sup> See the overview in Heijden (1995, p. 4-7).

<sup>10</sup> Spierenburg (1978, p. 106-109).

<sup>11</sup> Diederiks (1992, p. 71). See also Faber (1983, p. 253-254).

<sup>12</sup> Heijden (1995).

The Dutch evidence suggests that female crime was not a constant in the pre-industrial period. Apparently, there has been a long-term process of decreasing female involvement in prosecuted crime. The credit for first having realized this, must go to Malcolm Feeley. Next to re-examining others' data, he analyzed a long-term series of records from the Old Bailey in London. The percentage of female defendants, which fluctuated between 30 and 40 from 1687 to 1795, then started to decline, until it was under 10 by 1895<sup>13</sup>. Significantly, the trend was due less to the disappearance of typically female offenses and more to women's decreasing involvement in property crime. After a consideration of all factors which might have distorted the London figures, Feeley concludes that the downward trend was not an artefact, although he thinks that it reflected changing conceptions of femininity at the «control» side rather than women's real behavior. He discusses several possible explanations, which center around the decreasing public manifestation of women. Recent figures for Germany are -mostly, but not always- in line with Feeley's observations. About 30% of Bavarian offenders in the first half of the seventeenth century were women. Around 1700 their share had decreased to about 25%<sup>14</sup>. Figures for a later period refer to the whole of Germany: women's share in total criminality declined from about one fifth in the 1830s to about one seventh in the 1920s; their percentage among prosecutions for simple theft decreased from almost 30 in the 1880s to 20 in the period 1920-1924<sup>15</sup>.

Although criminologists have been largely unaware of these historical data, it is a common supposition that changes in the status of women in modern society are bound to affect the level of female criminality. Crucial factors are the increased participation of women in the work force and, more important perhaps, the decreasing influence of the traditional female sex role which stressed passivity. Indeed, a massive rise in female crime has been prophesied, by social scientists and journalists, for at least fifteen years now. Unfortunately, for their predictions, the massive rise has failed to occur until now. The subject continues to have media interest, though. In 1995, for example, a leading Dutch newspaper reported twice about figures published by the Central Bureau of Statistics: they found that the number of female suspects had increased by 4% while that of male suspects had decreased by 9% during the period 1984-1994. Over the last three years, however, both the numbers of prosecuted women and men had increased, the second only slightly less than the first<sup>16</sup>. So, any rise there was in the proportion of female criminals was hardly significant. If indeed factors like a relatively high participation of women in the work force contributed to a relatively high share of women in crime in the seventeenth century, they do not have a similar effect today.

Obviously, there is no uniform relationship between the general position of women in society and the percentage of women in the criminal justice system. This comes as no surprise. For one thing, the factor of social class complicates the mat-

<sup>13</sup> Feeley and Little (1991, p. 722). Although Little is a co-author in this article, the ongoing project is Feeley's.

<sup>14</sup> Behringer in Ulbricht (1995, p. 74-78). In Schwerhoff's contribution on Cologne, however, the female share in total crime fluctuates around 15% in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (Ulbricht, 1995, p. 87-89).

<sup>15</sup> Johnson (1995, p. 188-189). The figures have been re-calculated, since Johnson presents women's crime rates as a percentage of men's crime rates, not total crime.

<sup>16</sup> *De Volkskrant*, 10 May and 12 October 1995.

ter. The declining public manifestation of women from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth, which various historians have noted, primarily concerned the lower and lower-middle classes<sup>17</sup>. The increased participation of women in various sectors of public life in the second half of the twentieth century is mainly a middle-class phenomenon (and the middle and upper classes have always been privileged with respect to the risk of criminal prosecution). Second, the type of criminal activity is crucial. The high female involvement in crime in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries concerned property offenses more than anything else. In that period, the value of stolen goods (stolen by women and men), was usually rather low. When women stole, this was connected to their traditional association with providing food and taking care of the family's needs. If the level of women's participation in public life influences their tendency to engage in crime, it does so primarily by affecting their share in property offenses. Women's violence is quite another matter.

It is my hypothesis that the level of female violence is a function, first of all, of the power balance between men and women. Unlike women's public manifestation, this balance has consistently been uneven throughout the centuries and it has adjusted only slightly in recent times. Parallel to this, women have consistently accounted for a tiny proportion of violent crime. Feeley as well as the authors dealing with Germany observe that women were underrepresented in the category of violent offenses; especially in assault cases and somewhat less in homicide. In Rotterdam, in the first half of the eighteenth century, only four cases of female violence were considered serious enough to be treated as a criminal rather than a correctional case<sup>18</sup>. In studies of earlier periods, in several European countries, the picture is similar: the female involvement in serious violence, except sometimes in domestic homicide, was insignificant<sup>19</sup>. For example, women made up 11% in a sample of assault cases from fourteenth-century England<sup>20</sup>. Well into the twentieth century, then, we are faced with a historical constant. What about recent times?

A study by Schlossman and Cairns compares female delinquency in the USA in the 1950s and 1980s. The authors analyze the trials of adolescent girls in these two decades and they find indications for an increase in violence: «... the combined data are consistent with the hypothesis that there has been a generational increase in the occurrence of assaultive behaviors by adolescent girls outside the home»<sup>21</sup>. According to Schlossman and Cairns, actual female behavior has changed as well as criminal justice policy. When faced with girls, the juvenile courts of the 1950s were bent foremost on punishing precocious female sexuality. This is not their primary concern today, even though the level of sexual activity by adolescents has not diminished. The authors propose a two-stage model: first, girls became a little more

<sup>17</sup> On long-term changes with regard to women and work: Tilly and Scott (1978); Charles and Duffin (1985); Hanawalt (1986); Wiesner (1986); Hill (1989); Herlihy (1990); Woolf (1991). It should be noted that women's public manifestation involves more than their participation in the work force. In the life of local communities, for example, women continued to play an important role and that role must be called a public one. See also Lynch (1994), who argues against a too rigid dichotomy of private vs. public life.

<sup>18</sup> Heijden (1995, p. 16).

<sup>19</sup> For the Middle Ages, see Finch (1992) and the literature he cites (p. 28). For the early modern period, see, among others, Beattie (1986, chapter three).

<sup>20</sup> Hanawalt (1979, p. 123).

<sup>21</sup> Schlossman and Cairns (1993, p. 119).

assertive and prone to violence; next, juvenile courts and interventionist institutions changed their priorities, now attempting to curb girls' aggressiveness. Although the trend is intriguing, the difference between the 1950s and 1980s is far from spectacular. It would still be hazardous to predict that female violence will catch up with male violence, in accordance with a substantive shift in the power balance between men and women.

With court cases being so few in number, it is worth considering the additional evidence of popular literature, or street literature as Joy Wiltenburg calls it. Although it has little to tell about the incidence of female violence, it is indicative of men's attitudes toward it. Wiltenburg's study deals with early modern England and Germany. Female violence figures in broadsides telling the story of real crimes as well as in fictional literature, where crime and punishment are hardly at issue. In the broadsides, most offenses committed by women were family-related. Whereas the English loved to hear about husband murderers, the authors of German pamphlets focused on women, and men, who slaughtered their entire family in a moment of madness. Female violence in popular fiction, on the other hand, is usually acted out in a comic context. In both countries the victims of female violence are mostly men. We recognize the traditional motif of the world upside down. The scene usually is a domestic one, but especially in England women sometimes go out into the streets; for example, when a party of them attacks the proverbially effeminate tailors. Woman-to-woman violence, more comical still than that of women against men, is especially rare in English street literature. When it occurs, this violence, too, often takes place indoors; among mistress and maid, for example. The women seldom make use of knives or other weapons. They scratch, slap, pull hairs and throw or hit with all kind of objects<sup>22</sup>. Apparently, if the image of a woman imitating male violence like knife fighting was conceivable at all to the author of a popular play or story, he did not consider it a suitable motif.

The evidence shows that male popular authors considered the actions of violent women either as the «out-of-this-world» madness of a few individuals or -in fiction- as something to laugh about. Of course, the Netherlands may be different from England and Germany in this respect. Dutch popular literature has hardly been studied, but the work of Lotte van de Pol, dealing with prostitution, makes a beginning. Popular works on brothels and taverns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries often were humorous too, but they also contained warnings against the impertinent activities of whores and madams<sup>23</sup>.

## TWO AMSTERDAM WOMEN

In so far as the male authors of popular fiction presented the behavior of violent women as something to laugh about, not to be taken seriously, they helped sustain the notion that serious female violence did not exist. So let us see if we can find it nevertheless. The early modern Netherlands might be a good place for our search. It has been stated frequently that Dutch women of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries appeared more independent and self-assertive than their sisters in the sur-

<sup>22</sup> Wiltenburg (1992, p. 188-250).

<sup>23</sup> Pol (1996).

rounding countries<sup>24</sup>. Single women from the lower classes associated relatively easily with men; married women were reported by foreign travellers to handle much of the family's business. Did this independence translate into a sizeable group of women who could stand their ground and hit an opponent sometimes? Did women associate with violent men like knife fighters?<sup>25</sup>. To answer that question, what could be a better starting-point than the case of the only woman in Amsterdam who ever received the punishment of a cut in the cheek, usually reserved for male knife fighters?

Magtelt Jeekermans, fifty-one years old and born in Maastricht, lived with her husband and her sixteen-year old daughter, Barber, in one or two rooms of a house in a back alley. If there were other family members, the records do not mention them. The incident in question took place on Sunday, 2 October 1729. At eleven in the morning a certain Marrike came at the door, in the company of another woman, named Anna Smit. The reason for the women's visit lay in the sphere of gossip, verbal injury and honor; a sphere familiar to preindustrial historians. They complained that Magtelt had called Marrike's daughter a *dievegge* (female form of «thief»). The complaint only led to renewed quarrelling, in which Barber and Anna, the «seconds» of the main protagonists, engaged most intensely. Each of them claimed that the other had slapped her. What happened next? This was Anna's testimony in court: Barber attacked her and dragged her outside the room. In the corridor Barber held her in grip; then Magtelt intervened and cut Anna's face with a knife. Barber denied having dragged Anna into the corridor: «she must have followed me there». Asked whether her mother had cut Anna, she said it was dark in the corridor and she had only heard some noise. Magtelt herself stated: «I don't know if I have injured her. Because I was busy peeling potatoes, I had a knife in my hand. She touched me and I tried to throw her away from me».

At the next session the court sentenced mother and daughter without further questioning. Barber got eight days on bread and water and Magtelt was «... to be led on the scaffold, erected in front of the town hall of this city, and to receive a cut in her face at the executioner's hands». She also got four years spinhouse and a banishment of ten years. We do not know how the audience at the «justice day», 21 January 1730, reacted to the offense and the punishment. The theater, staged by the court as usual, began with the decapitation of a man who had killed another in a knife fight eight years previously. Then two sheep thieves were hanged with a sheep above their head. The corporal penalties followed, of which Magtelt's was scheduled last but one. The clerk who compiled the list of scaffold punishments just wrote in the margin: «has given a female person a cut in her face». The eye-for-an-eye punishment which she received, was meted out in Amsterdam to thirteen others, all men, between 1650 and 1750. After her appearance on the scaffold, the college of *schepenen* (the judges of the city's court) treated Magtelt with greater clemency. She obtained «reduction» and was released from the spinhouse in July 1731; her banishment was remitted<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Deursen (1991, p. 81-84); Pol (1982); Schama (1988, p. 409-416).

<sup>25</sup> On knife fighters, see my contribution to the meeting of the Social Science History Association, Atlanta, Nov. 1994 (to be published in a collective volume I am editing).

<sup>26</sup> R.A. 387, fo. 249, 251vs (Magtelt Jeekermans) & fo. 249vs, 251vs (Barber Overruyter); R.A. 638: 21 Jan. 1730; archive nr. 347 (*spin- en werkhuis*), inv. nr. 40, fo. 223. On reduction: Spierenburg



Did *schepenen* find they had imposed too harsh a punishment on Magtelt Jeekermans? Just a few months later they were remarkably lenient in a comparable case. The suspect they questioned was named Wijntje Alberts, twenty-nine years old and born in Leeuwarden. She served beer in a cellar on the waterfront. The court reproached her for keeping a disorderly place, since it was never quiet there, whereupon Wijntje blamed the disorder on her customers. This failed to impress the court. Two citizens and a harbor policeman testified «... that people are continually quarreling there and that she, prisoner, is the most impertinent beast that can be imagined». Next, the court heard the testimony of the victim, Susanna Stevens. Last Thursday night Susanna had entered Wijntje's cellar. The two women got into an argument, insulted each other and started a fight. Thus far, Wijntje confirmed the story, but Susanna went on: «she took a knife, cut through my apron and two skirts and then stabbed me in my right arm». Wijntje denied having had a knife at all, maintaining that her adversary had kicked and beaten her. However, two watchmen arriving at the scene had seen Wijntje carrying a knife and threatening the victim; a male servant had taken the knife from her hand. Again, *schepenen* immediately proceeded with a sentence at the next session: Wijntje was released with a rebuke<sup>27</sup>.

The suspects in these two trials had engaged in typically male violence: cutting or stabbing with a knife. The great contrast in the court's treatment of Magtelt Jeekermans and Wijntje Alberts is striking. It cannot be explained by peculiarities of the trials. In both cases the evidence was incomplete, depending for the essential part on the victim's testimony. Both women were born outside Amsterdam. Possibly, Wijntje was an informer of the *schout* (the court's prosecutor, who directed the interrogations and acted as chief of police), but in that case we have to assume that the court did not bother recruiting someone with a dubious reputation for this job. It is also striking that *schepenen* were satisfied with just one interrogation, despite the remaining uncertainties. When male fighters gave unsatisfactory answers, they were usually questioned several times. So I propose another reading of the contrast in punishment: it testifies to the fact that the court had no tradition of dealing with serious female aggressiveness and assault. Faced with the unfamiliar, *schepenen* wavered from one extreme to the other.

## WOMEN AND ASSAULT

Not every case of female assault was that serious. My file of women who committed nonhomicidal violence, covering the period 1650-1750, has been extracted from data sets originally compiled for an investigation of executions. These data sets consisted of (1) the sentences of all persons punished on the scaffold between 1650 and 1750; (2) a sample from all other criminal trials, leading to a nonpublic punishment, in this period. A third data set, collected more recently, consists of all trials for homicide during the period 1650-1810. The cases it contains of homicide by women will be discussed below. It follows that the assault file is made up of all women who received a scaffold punishment for nonhomicidal violence and a sample of women

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(1991, p. 144-147, 185-188). R.A. means Municipal Archive Amsterdam, Archive nr. 5061 (*Oud-Rechterlijk Archief*).

<sup>27</sup> R.A. 388, fo. 89vs, 91vs (quote on 90vs).

whose violent behavior led to a nonpublic penalty. Considering the small numbers involved, they had to be combined. This is alright, because we just saw that the lesser penalty did not preclude a serious crime. One reason for this lies in the legal rule that a scaffold punishment could be imposed only on persons who had confessed their crime. If the accused persistently denied, whether or not under torture, while the court accepted the evidence, a nonpublic sentence was pronounced.

Even though two of the original data sets were created for a statistical analysis of punishment rather than crime, the quantitative figures about female violence derived from them are unambiguous. Twelve out of 144 killers were women. The balance is more uneven still when we consider assault followed by public punishment. A total of 159 persons were punished on the scaffold for assault and only three of them were women. In addition two women mounted the scaffold as accomplices of violent men. The cases with a nonpublic punishment actually belong to three samples, taken from the court's trials in three consecutive periods: 1651-1683, 1684-1716 and 1717-1749. The proportion of female defendants in assault cases was 13%, 16% and 6%, respectively, in these periods<sup>28</sup>. Supplemented with a few trials of women for threatening behavior or complicity in violence, this makes twenty cases. Hence, the total file of women tried for nonhomicidal violence consists of twenty-five cases, including the two just discussed.

The first inquiry is into the degree of seriousness of the incidents concerned. To that end, the cases can be subdivided into three categories. Like Magtelt Jeekermans and Wijntje Alberts, some women had injured or threatened someone with a knife. The second category consists of the women who had not used a weapon. They had fought with their hands or had thrown objects at their adversaries. Thirdly, some women had accompanied violent men and were considered accomplices. Table 1 presents the numbers.

Table 1: Degree of seriousness of female assault, 1650-1750

	Number of cases
Assault with a knife . . . . .	7
Assault without a weapon . . . . .	12
Complicity/presence at male violence . . . . .	6

Source: Municipal Archive Amsterdam, *Confessieboeken*

Thus, a sizeable minority of women had made use of a knife. Once, the victim was male: Hilleetje Cornelis, twenty-two, had injured a young man of nineteen. The intended victim, however, was a woman. It happened in the street on a Friday at midnight. The young man walked there and saw Hilleetje when another woman was just passing her by. Hilleetje intended to attack that woman with a knife, but the young man immediately intervened. While trying to wrestle the knife from Hilleetje's hand, he was injured himself. The accused confessed this. She maintained she did not know the woman she wanted to attack. Rather than inquiring into her motive, the *schout* asked her why she carried a knife in the street that late. For no reason, she replied. Asked how she got the scar in her face, she claimed she had fallen into a

<sup>28</sup> Spierenburg (1978, appendix B, table 26).

glass<sup>29</sup>. Obviously, the court was surprised that a woman carried a knife in a public place; and that at night. The fact that she had a scar in her face suggested that she had been in the company of knife fighters before.

Like most defendants tried by the Amsterdam court, these women were overwhelmingly lower-class. Some were natives of Amsterdam though, like Aeltie Cornelis. She was twenty-four and it was her third trial. About her motives we hear little; Aeltie just told the court that she had quarreled with her victim, Marie Sijmons, the evening before she injured her. Late the next night, when Marie was already asleep, Aeltie came to her room. Apparently, the door was unlocked, which must have been common in houses where a number of families and individual people rented a room. With a knife she carried, Aeltie inflicted two wounds in Marie's neck; we are not told what kind of wounds. The victim said that the injuries had woken her up, but her assailant claimed that she was already awake. Two hours later Aeltie returned to the scene of the crime and the testimonies diverge again about what she said. Aeltie claimed she just wanted to see how her victim fared. According to Marie, she shouted... «are you still standing up? I thought you were already dead and I'm sorry that I didn't give you the rest» and, when she left the room again: «lie down, you beast». An interesting detail is that Aeltie confessed to have thrown the knife into a canal; a routine for disposing of the evidence practiced by many male fighters<sup>30</sup>.

A typical excuse, often presented by male fighters, was that they had not intended to stab their adversary at all. They had just raised their knife and the other had carelessly «walked into it». A few women came up with a comparable excuse. Annetje, a domestic servant born in Norway, said she had not realized at all that she had a knife in her hand. Annetje had been told that she would be fired and the question was whether she had cut her mistress' arm out of revenge. Another servant testified that Annetje had told her she intended to harass and beat the mistress before leaving the house. Annetje, denying the threat, told this story: «as I was cutting bread, I had a knife in my hand. At that moment the mistress wanted to beat me, but I raised my arm in defense. So it happened»<sup>31</sup>. A few other women rather claimed not to remember the incident. A washing-woman of forty-seven, accused of cutting the fingers of another woman, said she had been completely drunk; an excuse for withholding information given more often by men<sup>32</sup>.

What conclusion should we draw from the fact that a number of women, like men, fought with knives? Admittedly, the assault weapon often was or may have been a kitchen knife, but this can be interpreted in two ways. One way is to consider it an affirmation of women's ties to the domestic sphere. Such an interpretation is simple and misleading. The interpretation I propose is based on the fact that men also used their knives for cutting bread or peeling fruit. There was little differentiation between the knife as a weapon and the knife as a tool for handling food. When looked at it this way, the women injuring another with a knife exhibited typically male behavior. Certainly, it was considered male behavior and a violation of customary norms if a woman carried a knife in her pocket in the street. The case of Hillelje Cornelis confirms this. The court never made a fuss of men carrying a knife

<sup>29</sup> R.A. 355, fo. 120vs, 124. Year 1706.

<sup>30</sup> R.A. 332, fo. 11vs, 12, 12vs, 26. Year 1687.

<sup>31</sup> R.A. 342, fo. 1, 1vs. Year 1695.

<sup>32</sup> R.A. 351, fo. 233, 237vs. Year 1702.

in their pocket, as long as they kept it there. On the other hand, in a domestic setting some women found a convenient excuse in the kitchen function of a knife: they used it so often, they implied, that they forgot they had it in their hand when someone bothered them.

Many of the remaining cases from the sample were rather trivial. Sometimes one wonders why an incident made it to a criminal trial at all. Take this case in 1659: a forty-eight year old woman confesses to have beaten her mother, but she had intended to hit her sister, who evaded her. She was drunk, she admits. Maybe the case only went to trial because the accused had already stayed in the spinhouse for three years<sup>33</sup>. In other cases we just hear that a woman had fought with or beaten another woman. Two women were accused of severe injury through biting.

Several violent women had acted as a member of a group. The case of Adriaentje Jans is especially revealing. Her occupation was said to be glove-sewer, but she arrived in jail «picked up from a whorehouse». On a Sunday night at eleven three prostitutes, among whom Adriaentje, and a few *pluggen* (prostitutes' protectors) had attacked «two citizens and their *vrouwen*». The latter word can mean wives as well as women (in this case, presumably, fiancées); the formulation is meant to convey first of all that they were respectable people, unlike their assailants. The motive for the attack was not recorded. The assailants pursued their victims over the New Bridge until the Texel Quay, where Adriaentje, according to the accusation, seized one of the women with force, reached for the ribbon in her hair, and injured her face. Adriaentje admitted to have seized the woman. She did it because one of the men had slapped her in her face<sup>34</sup>. Thus, she retaliated an attack from a man by counter-attacking a woman from the group of opponents.

Men, for their part, routinely beat women when they had a grudge against them; that is, in the social milieu we are dealing with<sup>35</sup>. Sometimes these men were encouraged by a female companion, as in the case of Marry Jans. At age seventeen, she had been employed briefly in a «dancing-room,» but now, at age twenty-six, she was living with her mother, engaged to Pieter Matijse and pregnant by him. With Pieter and another couple she had visited a tavern and on their way back they encountered two women. Jokingly, Pieter asked these women if they would buy them a beer. The reply was: «ask it from your whores whom you have with you». This insult started a fight in which Pieter slapped one of the women on her bare buttocks. His mate, wanting to do the same to the other woman, lifted her skirt, but she was too strong and prevented him «to execute his evil plan». Marry was condemned for encouraging her menfolk. She admitted having shouted «beat them until the devil takes them»<sup>36</sup>.

A few other women tried for complicity in violence also were charged with encouraging the men they accompanied. In 1726 a certain Thomas van der Val was interrogated about an incident in which he, a friend and two women had confronted two men. Thomas admitted to have stabbed one of these men in his side, adding that

<sup>33</sup> R.A. 313, fo. 7.

<sup>34</sup> R.A. 349, fo. 194vs. Year 1700.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. my contribution to the meeting of the Social Science History Association, Atlanta, Nov. 1994 (to be published in a collective volume I am editing). That men routinely beat women has also been reported for 18th-century Paris: see Garrioch (1986, p. 85-86).

<sup>36</sup> R.A. 313, fo. 98, 100, 101 (Pieter Matijse); fo. 99, 100vs (Marry Jans). Year 1660.

the women had shouted «come on, give him something»<sup>37</sup>. Prostitutes might be tried along with their violent protectors. One woman, for example, had been arrested after the two men who had to keep an eye on her, had severely beaten up a client who had made trouble in her room<sup>38</sup>. The charge against some women amounted to no more than having been present at the violent activities of their male companions, who might have escaped themselves. A female defendant in 1664, for example, had this to say: «with my fiancé and his friend I went to a winehouse at the apple market. On our way there, we met three men, who were to embark on a ship with my fiancé, and a woman. They all accompanied us to the winehouse. On our way back, I was a little behind and suddenly I noticed that our company was confronting another group. There was a fist fight, but I have not seen any knife drawn. When I wanted to leave, my hand was injured and then the deputy-*schout* arrested me»<sup>39</sup>. Obviously, police attention had been aimed at the entire fracas, but she was the only one arrested.

In most cases, the women tried for being present at violence were questioned rather as witnesses than as suspects. Their fault was to have been in the company of the actual offenders<sup>40</sup>. They had been together with aggressive men, who were no good in the eyes of respectable people. Watchmen or *schout*'s servants found it a matter of course to arrest them together with the male suspects. The magistrates found it convenient, when such a dishonorable woman was in custody anyway, to interrogate her about the details of the incident. Even when it turned out that her own role had been minimal, the court did not bother about the procedure. *Schepenen* pronounced a sentence – banishment, imprisonment or release with a rebuke – nonetheless, for having been present at the scene. This might be legally construed as having refrained to prevent violence from happening. Alternatively, the court may have routinely equated presence with encouragement and, hence, complicity.

Next to the degree of seriousness of female violence, the victim's sex is a crucial variable. In table 2 this factor is combined with that of the scene of the crime: someone's home or a public place. For obvious reasons, the complicity cases must be excluded here.

Table 2: Female assault: victim's sex and scene of the crime, 1650-1750.

	In a home	In a public place	Place unrecorded	Total
Female victim . . . . .	7	5	4	16
Male victim . . . . .	—	1	1	2
Child victim . . . . .	—	1	—	1
Total . . . . .	7	7	5	19

Source: Municipal Archive Amsterdam, *Confessieboeken*

<sup>37</sup> R.A. 385, fo. 74vs, 85vs (Johanna Meyer) & fo. 49vs, 83 (Thomas van der Val).

<sup>38</sup> R.A. 325, fo. 30vs, 39vs, 43. Year 1679.

<sup>39</sup> R.A. 316, fo. 153.

<sup>40</sup> There was a male parallel to this in the form of a (young) man found in the company of thieves: when nothing could be proved against him, he was still banished or given another light punishment.

The ratio of female to male victims is no less than 8:1. Obviously, women tended to attack other women, rather than men. This was reflected most tellingly in the case of Adriaentje Jans, who retaliated an attack from a man by counter-attacking a woman from the group of opponents. The factor «scene of the crime,» on the other hand, is in balance. Of the scenes recorded, seven were public and seven domestic. If the complicity cases were included, it would be ten public and nine domestic. Since we are dealing with lower-class women, the relative prominence of public scenes is not surprising. In Amsterdam as well as other large cities at the time, these women spent more time in the streets than their sisters from more respectable classes.

The case of male victim in a public place actually was quite trivial. The defendant had thrown mud and stones at a servant of justice, for undisclosed reasons<sup>41</sup>. The other case of female-on-male violence is interesting, because the defendant actually had a grudge against the victim's wife. Clara Walraven, convicted no less than nine times before, wanted to take revenge on a witness who had testified in her last trial. The witness was a woman, but her husband suffered the revenge. Clara had scratched his face, beaten him and broken some of the house's window-glasses<sup>42</sup>. Possibly, the victim's wife was out when Clara, expecting her to be in, went to her home. If that was the case, it confirms the exceptionality of women attacking men. Also when the victim was another woman and someone intervened, it was most likely to be a man. This happened in a second case of a maid confronting her mistress because of a dismissal. The mistress, living at the Herengracht, was said to be of the city's highest rank. Nevertheless, her maid called her a «thunder beast» and «a whore,» saying «shall I get you a pimp?». The next day the maid returned to the house and attempted to beat the mistress and her daughter. Male servants prevented her from doing this<sup>43</sup>.

The case with a child victim belongs to the sphere of mental disturbance rather than aggressiveness. Dorothe Dorens stayed with a married couple who had a one-and-a-half year old child. One Sunday morning she went out, saying she had to get the money for her lodging fee. The wife entrusted the child to her for a walk. In the *Plantage* (a park) she decided to strangle the child with a tie, but just in time, as she later said in court, the voice of God told her to stop. She took the child to the policemen in the nearby watch-house, who reported that she looked confused but the child fresh and healthy; the tie was loose. Dorothe was banished from the city for ever<sup>44</sup>.

The fact that many cases from the sample were rather trivial suggests that serious female violence was an unfamiliar thing in court. Was it also an unfamiliar sight in the city? Any speculation about a dark number is futile. It should be noted, however, that only cases in which violence was the principal offense could be considered. Possibly, side-stories of female aggression can be found in the interrogations of women tried for property offenses. A consideration of the women's age, finally, brings no surprise. Of the twenty-five defendants in the sample, one was under twenty, fifteen were in their twenties, five in their thirties and four over forty. This is a normal age-distribution for any group of criminals, male or female.

<sup>41</sup> R.A. 318, fo. 94. Year 1668.

<sup>42</sup> R.A. 344, fo. 132vs, 133. Year 1697. I listed the scene as unrecorded, because it is unclear whether Clara had entered the victim's house or attacked him at the door.

<sup>43</sup> R.A. 384, fo. 135. Year 1726.

<sup>44</sup> R.A. 397, fo. 48vs, 73. Year 1738.

## FEMALE HOMICIDE

Between 1650 and 1810 the Amsterdam court tried 144 killers. A major trend concerns the victims: after 1750 a much larger proportion of victims than before were intimates<sup>45</sup>. Looking only at homicide cases with a woman as perpetrator, it is impossible to identify a trend over time. The file of female killers (with noninfant victims) consists of only twelve cases: 8.3% of the total. This is a remarkable fact. Between 1524 and 1811 the ratio of prosecuted to detected homicide in Amsterdam fluctuated between 1:3 and 1:9. As it may be assumed that men had more opportunities to flee from the scene of the crime and escape the city than women had, the actual rate of female homicide may have been two to six times the rate of prosecutions of women for homicide. That would amount to a woman killing a noninfant person in the city (with over 200,000 inhabitants) once in every seven years at least and once in every two years at most during the period 1650-1810. In view of the low number of trials, there is no point in tabulating them. It should be noted, however, that there was only one case of a woman who put an adult man to death (the other male victims were children).

Likewise, in only one of the twelve cases the scene of the crime was a public place; and not even quite public in the sense of open to everyone's view. Cieper Malysz, a Jewish girl of eighteen, killed her friend Roosje, thirteen and also Jewish, in the women's toilet under one of Amsterdam's many bridges. Roosje had asked Cieper to take some of her possessions to the pawn-shop, but the latter had cheated her friend. When Roosje wanted her things back and Cieper did not have the money, she panicked. She told her friend to accompany her to the public toilet, where she stabbed and cut her five times, after which she pushed the body through the toilet's bars into the canal. She also took Roosje's earrings. When two Christian citizens arrived at the scene, Cieper blew out their lantern and ran away, but she was arrested that very night<sup>46</sup>.

The remaining eleven incidents took place in either the killer's or the victim's home, which often was the same anyway. Money was involved in four more cases, but neither of them was a straightforward robbery. A young woman, who had recently arrived in the city from Denmark in the hope of finding employment, constantly quarrelled with her landlady about the lodging fee. One morning the quarrel escalated: the landlady beat her lodger with a broomstick and the latter smashed her opponent's head with an axe. Although she broke up one of her landlady's suitcases after the murder, she left its contents on the bed<sup>47</sup>. A married woman strangled her neighbor, when the latter had fallen asleep after they had drunk liquor together. Then she took her gold chain and silver bag. She told the court that her creditors were pressing her and that she had been desperate about getting money; her husband knew nothing of this<sup>48</sup>. Another married woman was poor and desperate too. She had borrowed money from a woman whose servant girl she was acquainted with, but she was unable to pay it back. In her own home she murdered the servant, who came to get the money; then she went to the house of the servant's mistress and

<sup>45</sup> Spierenburg (1994, p. 709-712; 1996, p. 88-94, written in 1992). The percentage of female killers mentioned here is slightly different, because I found a few additional cases of homicide since then.

<sup>46</sup> R.A. 408, fo. 65vs-72, 113vs, 120vs. Year 1748.

<sup>47</sup> R.A. 316, fo. 82, 84vs (Elsje Christiaanse). Year 1664.

<sup>48</sup> R.A. 355, fo. 184, 193, 196vs, 203vs (Ccelitie Cornelisse). Year 1706.

murdered her there<sup>49</sup>. The final killer in this group was a servant girl herself, aged twenty-eight. She hated the old women, two sisters, in whose house she worked. When one mistress was asleep and the other again made the servant angry, she strangled the old woman and left the house with money and jewelry<sup>50</sup>.

Three women killed one or two of their own children, all three in a context of desperation or mental disturbance. The first victim was an illegitimate child of three; its mother, part-time prostitute, alone and depressed, had just been beaten both by a few pimps and her landlady<sup>51</sup>. A young widow, who had stabbed to death her legitimate son and illegitimate daughter, said she had done it «out of poverty, sadness and debts»<sup>52</sup>. The third woman, obviously disturbed, had already spent a year in the pest-house as insane. She was a Catholic, married, had borne five children, four of whom had died, and the fifth, a son of eleven, was mute. Asked why she had killed that son, she gave no coherent reply: it had to be done or else the child would be «sulphured» [in hell?]; now she could die peacefully without being tormented by the Pope<sup>53</sup>.

Two cases were love affairs. A man and his concubine made an ingenious plan to murder his wife and they succeeded. The two lovers each had an equally active part in the murder<sup>54</sup>. The other love affair is the oldest lesbian *crime passionnel* recorded in the Netherlands. No men were involved here, just three women. One of them stabbed her presumed rival in the presence of her lover<sup>55</sup>. The case has become a *cause célèbre* in Dutch gay historiography<sup>56</sup>. The file contains just one case of a wife who killed her husband. It is a tale of domestic tensions. Anna and Jan were both widowed when they married. She had two children from her former marriage, he one; together they had a child of sixteen months. Preceding the crime, the couple quarrelled almost daily. They were poor. On the fatal night Jan had reproached Anna for giving too much food to her own children. He kicked her and hit her head. When she reached for a knife, he retorted: «why would I not drag you by your hair and kick the bowels out of your belly?» He kicked her again. Anna reacted with «I warn you; stay away from me; I will defend myself with the knife». Jan shouted «thunder child; I'll break your neck». Then Anna stabbed Jan. She immediately ran out of the house, cruising the city for some time. When she came back, she made coffee for her husband, who had been bandaged in the meantime. She also helped him put on a clean shirt. He said «don't cry; I'll make it». Shortly afterwards he died<sup>57</sup>.

This tale of domestic tensions invites a little comparison with male homicide. The story is no different from the common sequence of events in domestic homicide, except that the eventual killer is the wife, not the husband. In the historical literature on female violence it is sometimes stated that, once women crossed a certain thresh-

<sup>49</sup> R.A. 406, fo. 227vs-245, 247vs, 253vs; R.A. 407, fo. 1-6, 21vs (Hendrina Wouters). Year 1746. See also Spierenburg (1984, p. 65-66).

<sup>50</sup> R.A. 486, p. 2, 6, 15, 326; R.A. 487, p. 34, 99, 116, 128, 167, 330 (Grietje Franse) Year 1799.

<sup>51</sup> R.A. 320, fo. 57vs-58vs (Trintie Pieters) Year 1772.

<sup>52</sup> R.A. 393, fo. 215vs, 222 (Sara Abiatar) Year 1736.

<sup>53</sup> R.A. 452, p. 419, 432, 448 (Maria Meijbeek). Year 1783.

<sup>54</sup> R.A. 426, p. 170, 183, 193, 207, 248, 270, 351, 449, 514; R.A. 427, p. 1, 59, 171, 225, 284, 330 (Nathaniel Donker) + R.A. 426, p. 227, 282, 319, 335, 354; R.A. 327, p. 17, 64, 231, 258, 282, 331, 479 (Dorothea Bosselman). Year 1766-1767.

<sup>55</sup> R.A. 468, p. 272, 295, 335, 356, 362, 442 (Bartha Schuurman). Year 1792.

<sup>56</sup> See Meer (1984, p. 139-42), and Everard (1994, p. 136 et sq.).

<sup>57</sup> R.A. 419, p. 536, 540; R.A. 420, p. 13, 18, 87 (Anna Grotenhuijs). Year 1761.



hold, they were capable of excessive violence. Neither this case, nor the others cited lend credibility to this view. For every type mentioned, there were male parallels among Amsterdam murder trials. Among male defendants were clumsy robbers smashing someone's head with a spade, men maiming their victims, disturbed fathers killing their young children, and jealous lovers. Female killers, then, were not an exceptional type. They were less numerous only, because they almost never committed one other type of homicide, which was predominant among male killers.

The female homicide file contains one such case: an insult, a quarrel, a fight, a knife drawn, one of the parties fatally injured. When men did such things, however, the scene was a tavern, from where they went to the street. In this case, the scene was a home. A woman named Engel Sybrants owned the house and she rented rooms to Maria Borman and to Jannetie Fagelaar and her fourteen-year old daughter. The latter had been asked by her mother, who suffered from a fever, to get her some beer. Because she had stayed away too long, Engel reproached her upon her return. The daughter replied with impertinent words. Then Maria came from downstairs, rebuking Jannetie's daughter for her impertinence toward the landlady. This caused Jannetie to yell at Maria: «mind your own business». Various insults followed from both sides. Then Maria walked up to Jannetie, pulled her hair and called her a married men's whore. The insult was serious indeed; even prostitutes themselves looked down upon colleagues who accepted married men as clients<sup>58</sup>. Jannetie, just busy cutting a piece of bread, thrust the knife in Maria's chest, while uttering the same words she had said. Then Jannetie dropped the knife. Maria was able still to pick up a piece of wood, which a fourth woman, not mentioned before, attempted to cast from her hand. Then Maria fell down and died shortly afterwards. Jannetie told the court that she had intended no harm and just wanted to defend herself. This cannot have been convincing, but the judges seemed uncertain again how to evaluate the case. For a similar deed, a man would normally have been decapitated. The *schout* indeed demanded capital punishment for Jannetie, but *schepenen* imposed the penalty of sword over head and a banishment of twenty years<sup>59</sup>.

Again, a knife was the murder weapon; it was used in six of the twelve cases of female homicide. Five times the method was strangling and once an axe was the murder weapon. The strangling cases complicate the comparison with the assault file, because the nonhomicidal equivalent of strangling would be just to grab someone's throat and I never encountered this as an offense in its own right. A few differences and similarities between the homicide and assault files call for comment nonetheless. The greater frequency of the knife in the homicide file reflects the fact that women did not partake of the tradition of knife fighting, in which the aim usually was to give one's opponent a cut or two. For women, the threshold impeding the use of this weapon was higher, so when they crossed that threshold, the result was more likely to be fatal. A second difference concerns the proportion of child victims: only one in the assault file, but four out of fourteen (or five, if we include thirteen-year old Roosje) in the homicide file. Here, too, an explanation suggests itself: when a woman beat a child, this would normally be regarded as a disciplinary act inviting little comment; only in extreme cases, violence against children was prosecuted. The most significant

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Pol (1988).

<sup>59</sup> R.A. 409, fo. 187, 190vs, 204vs. Year 1750. On the penalty of sword over head: Spierenburg (1984, p. 79-80).

difference concerns the scene of the crime. Whereas all but one of the homicidal incidents took place in a home, in the assault file public places came to 50% (and they would still come to 37% if all unrecorded crime scenes were in fact homes). Women, it seems, almost never resorted to extreme violence, except in domestic conflict. Together, the differences suggest that, in the case of female defendants, unlike in that of male defendants, we cannot take homicidal violence as indicative for all violence. Cases of assault by women should always be taken into consideration.

The principal similarity concerns the near absence of adult men as victims: one out of fourteen in the homicide file and two out of nineteen in the nonhomicidal file. These figures seem conclusive. However serious female violence was, women seldom attacked men. This conclusion forms an intriguing contrast with Wiltenburg's observations from popular literature. In this literature, women did attack men and, in works of fiction, female violence took place in a comical context. For their part, men seldom reserved their aggression for their own sex: they beat women both in popular literature and the reality represented in court records. Often, this happened under the influence of alcohol. What about alcoholic women?

Only a few women, prosecuted for assault, said they had been drunk. The silence in the interrogation protocols of other female defendants can mean either one of three things: it was simply not recorded; women were ashamed to admit this in court; violent women were drunk less often than violent men. Whatever was the case, women were a visible presence in the tavern culture, in which male knife fighters set the tone. Women frequently figure in the interrogation protocols of men tried for homicide or assault. Since these women usually appeared in court only as witnesses, their alcohol consumption mattered less to those questioning them. In the world of taverns women themselves seldom became violent. The stories told by knife fighters are often rich in detail, but women primarily take the role of background accessories. When they pay a visit to a man or go out with one or more of them, they are the man's sweetheart or fiancée. In other cases, respectable witnesses or the court clerk routinely call them «whores» (which does not necessarily refer to professional prostitution). Thus, the women associating with knife fighters did so in a context of either traditional courtship or dishonorable sexuality, but they hardly partook of the culture of violence. When harassed by a man in a tavern, many women chose to avoid the man rather than to defend themselves. Or they sought the protection of another man, which they regularly enjoyed. Even in the tavern culture, then, few women resorted to (serious) violence.

That women often sought male protection, indicates that they did not disapprove of violence per se. Several women encouraged men in their violent behavior. One woman incited a man to serious violence. The case is outside the file with female defendants, because only the man was sentenced. The relationship between Grietje Barents, a thirty-six year old salt seller, and Pieter Egerse, a twenty-four year old sailor, remains unclear. They may have been lovers. Grietje just admitted that she had occasionally ordered drinks to be brought to Pieter's room, which they had consumed together, and that her little daughter had picked up Pieter from his room a couple of times. He was not interrogated about the character of their relationship. Earlier, in any case, Grietje had been sleeping with a certain Christoffel Mijgenaar. He was probably the father of her child; Grietje had sued Christoffel in vain. Now that he had won the suit, he was about to marry another woman. Grietje often complained to Pieter how much this hurt her feelings. In court, she denied having incited her friend to take

revenge for her on Christoffel, but several witnesses had heard her say as much and Pieter himself confessed to have acted at her instigation. She had provided him with money to buy a knife and promised to give him more if he would injure Christoffel with it. Before he succeeded in this, they had pursued the intended victim in the streets several times, she with her face hidden behind her headdress. Each time there was no good opportunity, or maybe Pieter was afraid. In the evening of 28 December 1697 the two of them waited on Christoffel in front of his house. When he left, Grietje, again with her face covered, encouraged her friend anew: «there he is; do it now». They followed the victim until he stopped near a baker's store. Grietje demanded from her companion to stab Christoffel in his back. Pieter objected: «the man can die from that». Finally, he cut Christoffel's cheek and nose.

Whereas Pieter was punished on the scaffold with whipping and a cut in the cheek, Grietje's case was «kept *in reatu*» (undecided)<sup>60</sup>. This means that *schepenen* considered it possible that Grietje's claim that she had nothing to do with the crime was true and, by implication, that Pieter's story about pursuing the victim together was false. If so, we can only guess why *schepenen* were content to leave the matter at that. Whether Pieter had acted on his own or with Grietje's complicity, however, Grietje had refrained from attacking herself the man she was angry at.

## CONCLUSION

The behavior of most Dutch women would have pleased the reverend Hondius. They were no fighters. The Amsterdam court prosecuted few women for violence and a fair number of them, moreover, were charged with trivial acts. The small size of the resulting files made it futile to look for changes during the period studied. The low figures for female violence are in line with the findings of other historians. Throughout preindustrial Europe women were no fighters, though primarily because of cultural codes older than Hondius' religiously inspired admonitions. In their turn, these cultural codes were a function of an uneven power balance between men and women. Clearly, this balance was uneven also in the social world of the women who did become violent.

The minority who defied cultural stereotypes and religious warnings is interesting in its own right. In several ways, these women imitated male types of aggression. Some cut at their opponent with a knife. They knew about routines like throwing the knife into a canal and, when in court, claiming they had been drunk. Women's violence, no less than women's abstention from violence, depended on a learning process. This is consistent with Elias' notion that in human emotions, learned ways have become dominant over unlearned ways<sup>61</sup>.

The women in question learned about the culture of violence through close contact with men participating in it. Almost all Amsterdam defendants, male and female, belonged to the segment of the city's population from the lower-middle class downwards. But the women prosecuted for violence, on average, belonged to the lower echelons of that segment. If a woman had an occupation listed, it was usually domestic service or some lowly-paid trade. Several women were denoted as whores, indicating their distance from the respectable citizenry. Some were indeed

<sup>60</sup> R.A. 347, fo. 226vs, 269vs (Pieter Egerse); R.A. 347, fo. 228, 234vs, 269vs (Grietje Barents).

<sup>61</sup> See above (in reference to Elias, 1991).

professional prostitutes. In short, the great majority of the women discussed belonged to a social milieu at the border of the respectable and the unrespectable segment of the working classes: just like the male fighters whose behavior they imitated. These women and men lived a great part of their lives in the street or in taverns. This makes it understandable that female assault took place in public as well as domestic settings. The group of women making up the assault and homicide files hardly overlapped with that other group foreign travellers commented about. The independently-minded women they encountered must have been middle-class or at least from the upper echelons of the working classes.

The conclusion that women tended to attack other women, rather than men, contains few surprises<sup>62</sup>. Of course it had something to do with men's greater bodily strength. But socio-cultural factors are likely to have operated too. The culture of violence was a male culture and women recognized this. Some might imitate male violence, but they did not step into the male world. Female violence was same-sex violence.

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<sup>62</sup> Schwerhoff arrives at the same conclusion for Cologne in the period 1557-1620: see his contribution to Ulbricht (1995).

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