

# The Other Half

## GIRLS IN GANGS

Girls and women are committed supporters and members of gangs. They are victims, witnesses, and perpetrators of violence. This chapter reviews the emerging international body of evidence that sheds light on the roles that girls and women play in both gangs and armed groups.

**Their numbers and roles.** Estimates of the female proportion of the gang population vary greatly. National youth survey data from the United States and United Kingdom suggest that females account for 25 and 50 per cent of all gang members, respectively, whereas US law enforcement data puts the figure at seven per cent. A conservative estimate of the global female gang population is 132,000–660,000.

**Both sexes join for protection against abusive families or other youths.**

Girls' involvement in gangs and violence has long existed. Early 20th-century accounts focused on describing girls' sexuality and promiscuity, and portraying them as mere auxiliaries of boy gangs. Careful assessments of the experiences of female gang members only began to feature prominently in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the United States but increasingly from other countries. Today most female gang members are part of male-dominated 'mixed gender gangs'.

Like armed groups, gangs vary greatly in their nature and purpose from one place to another. Throughout the world girls and women act as combatants, supporters, and wives, girlfriends, or dependents. In both gangs and groups, girls and women fight, spy, and transport weapons and messages.



Detained female gang members of Mara 18 flash gang signs while shouting insults at rival gang members, San Salvador, May 2004.  
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**Motivations to join.** A complex set of factors determines why girls join gangs, as it does for boys. Both sexes join gangs for 'protection' against abusive families or other youths. Smaller quantitative studies suggest that violence in the family is a strong factor motivating girls to join gangs, possibly more so than for boys. Ethnicity, race, and culture affect how girls define their own sexuality, including notions of purity, loyalty, and autonomy, in turn determining their approach to 'femininity' in pursuit of 'respectability'. Gang membership can empower girls to resist traditional gender role expectations while providing protection and a refuge from violence and oppression at home. Yet at the same time gangs and armed groups tend to put girls at heightened risk of violence, while also increasing their social marginalization.

**Violence.** Although male gang members make up the majority of gun violence victims, girls and women appear to be more likely to suffer sexual abuse, both within gangs and at home. Sexual exploitation of girls within gang structures has received special attention by researchers and the media, leading to a categorization of girls into two groups: those who are 'as tough as the boys' and fight to defend themselves, and those who are sexually exploited, sometimes on the premise of being 'initiated'.

Although they may do so less frequently than men, women around the world have used aggression and brutality in conflict and non-conflict settings throughout history. Often it is the outcome of violent victimization. Women join gangs or groups and perpetrate violence to ensure that people will not disrespect them (or their families) and to signal that they can defend themselves.

The use of violence by women in the gang context—and generally—remains poorly understood. Despite what the newspaper headlines might suggest, girls and women tend to use weapons and engage in acts of violence less frequently and with lesser intensity than their male counterparts. Rather than firearms, they often opt for knives, stones, or other tools. In general, public and professional concern with female violence appears to be more indicative of cultural anxiety over changing social norms than any significant change in female behaviour.

Sex composition may be a good proxy for a gang's engagement in violence. Evidence suggests that girls in all- or majority-female gangs may be less engaged in violence than male or female members of sex-balanced or all- or majority-male gangs.

**The way forward.** Female gang research stagnated following a flurry of studies in the early 1990s. Kick-starting the research agenda would involve undertaking more multisite surveys that generate comparable and generalizable data. The field may also benefit from cross-fertilization with that of 'armed groups' because—as this chapter demonstrates—there are stark parallels in women's motivations to join these groups, the type of roles they play, and the risks they face. Certain themes may be relevant to both gang and group contexts, for example the role of sex composition in predicting girls' risk of victimization. If that causal link can be established, it would support a call for systematic collection of data on sex composition as a key gang or group characteristic.

**Programmes that cast girls and women solely as victims may unintentionally reinforce passivity.**

Programming for girls remains vastly insufficient and is rarely evidence-based. Despite the accumulation of accounts of female agency and violence within gang research, many practical questions remain unanswered. Much more research is needed to understand why they join gangs and engage in violence and to inform gender-sensitive approaches to prevent and respond to the problem. Available evidence points clearly to the need for programming to recognize the specific vulnerabilities of girls while building on their resilience. ■