

Barbara Kay: Another study undermines feminist stereotype of women who kill

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Melissa Ann Weeks, 77, of New Glasgow, N.S., also known as the "Internet Black Widow," leaves a Cape Breton Regional Police Services vehicle escorted by Const. Erin Donovan, left, and Const. Geoff MacLeod for a court appearance at the Sydney Justice Centre

There are two main categories of women killers, and both types were featured on the front page of the National Post today.

One article, "[Burning- bed cases rarer than thought](#)" informs us that according to a study of spousal homicides of men by women, by Ottawa researchers in conjunction with the Quebec coroners' office, "barely a quarter of husband killers are victims of domestic abuse." The article goes on to challenge feminist stereotypes of the oppressor male and victim female.

The other front- page article, sparked by the arrest this week of Melissa Ann Weeks for the attempted murder of her older lover, looks at the phenomenon of the "[Black Widow](#)" female killer of men. The story is a familiar one for those interested in the syndrome. Ms Weeks – a.k.a Ms Friedrich and Ms Stewart – is accused of steadily poisoning a divorced, lonely man she found via the Internet. A veteran in the husband- poisoning trade, Ms Weeks is charged with doctoring her lover's nightly ice cream treat. As he weakened, she stripped him financially, as she had done previously to another credulous spouse.

Both articles tell us that women are perfectly capable of violence that is unprovoked by men. When it comes to spousal killings, men are more likely to kill during a fit of spontaneous rage, sparked by sexual jealousy, executed with a gun or a knife. Such murders are readily reported and easily solved. Women, usually thought to be the less rational and more emotional sex, are, when in a killing frame of mind, more calculated in their planning, more circumspect in their methods, and more likely to escape detection. Their motivation is more likely to be financial than sexual, as alleged in this Black Widow case.

Poison is certainly a favoured strategy. But, according to the FBI, the second and third preferred methods of spousal killing by women are proxy killings: the engagement of a professional killer's services or killing- by- boyfriend. If these killings are detected, they are not classified as domestic violence, but listed as "multiple- offender" cases.

Killings of men are nine times more likely to go undetected as killings of women, according to the FBI. They know that many of those killings of men are contract killings by spouses, but cannot pinpoint the exact numbers, as no in- depth studies have been done on the phenomenon of proxy killings of men.

In Canada, proxy killings are also not classified under domestic violence, but as general homicides. Indeed, so strong is the prejudice against identifying women as spousal killers that sometimes an intimate- partner killing by a woman of a man doesn't get reported as domestic violence. We saw that in the case of the 2007 murder of London, Ontario retired police superintendent [David Lucio](#) by his mistress, police inspector Kelly Johnson (who then killed herself). The crime, irrefutably an act of domestic violence, was not classified as such. As a result, that year's police statistics – since there was only one other domestic violence killing in London that year – read as 100% male- perpetrated, instead of 50-50% as they should have.

Old stereotypes die hard. Whether they kill by poison, by knife or by boyfriend, women are not always victims and men are victims more often than they are assumed to be. It is encouraging to see news stories that help to dismantle a persistent ideology- inspired mythology.

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