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Mean Girls and Media: The Teenage Fists of Feminism

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I watched an episode of *The Bad Girls Club* on the Oxygen Network the other night.

It's my job. I work in the field of gender. That's not to say it was easy.

I did learn that the F-word can be used as a verb (transitive or intransitive, as well as compound), adverb, adjective, command, interjection and noun -- often in a single sentence. I learned, too, that "skank," "ho", bitch," and "slut" can be used interchangeably as a term of affection or derision.

As I watched the second beat-down of that particular episode, I wondered: After the decades of falling barriers, is this what feminism and equality had in mind?

In a way, it is.

Polemics aside, feminism is ultimately about the freedom to chose and compete and be who you are -- also to tumble into the slime pit of excess.

As cable television has learned, there's money in the mire -- lots of it.

Snooki and her housemates, for one example, emerged from that bubbling Petri dish that is the *Jersey Shore* hot tub millionaires many times over -- more than enough to cure anything they caught there. Snooki's book, by the way, is also on the *New York Times* bestsellers list. As she Tweeted to her fans: "OMG."

Maybe it's the fact that I'm the mother of a daughter who is a teenager. She's happy, healthy; works hard, and -- to my knowledge -- never punched anyone.

I worry for her people.

The threat-level has gone down a bit after a very a factual and reasonable [article](#) in the *New York Times* by researchers Mike Males and Meda-Chesney Lind.

They examined every major database that the authorities use to measure crime, and found that girl violence is plummeting, and major crimes committed by girls is at the lowest level in four decades. Crimes like fights and assaults have been dropping for a decade. There have also been striking improvements, they found, in girls' personal safety.

All very good news. But *girls-who-punch* is a fairly new media creation. What happens over time?

Recent research shows that the teenage brain is a high-revving work in progress -- quick to act, slow to weigh the consequences, and a sponge for outside influences, especially the media.

There is reason to believe that the *Bad Girls* no more represent the state of the American teenage girl than the guests on the *Jerry Springer Show* represent the state of American dental health.

But there is also reason to fear that foul-mouthed swagger and mean-tempered aggression could, over time and with enough promotion, become an acceptable model of feminine behavior. And, clearly, programmers believe they're on to something. It's not a show until someone gets hit.

There have been detours on the road to female empowerment in the past. Let's hope this is one of them.