



## 'An astonishing human failure'. The influence of gender on the image of perpetrators of infanticide in the courtroom and crime reporting in the Netherlands, 1960-1989

Siska van der Plas & Willemijn Ruberg

**To cite this article:** Siska van der Plas & Willemijn Ruberg (2023) 'An astonishing human failure'. The influence of gender on the image of perpetrators of infanticide in the courtroom and crime reporting in the Netherlands, 1960-1989, *The History of the Family*, 28:1, 17-36, DOI: [10.1080/1081602X.2022.2061556](https://doi.org/10.1080/1081602X.2022.2061556)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/1081602X.2022.2061556>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 12 Apr 2022.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 1073




[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



# 'An astonishing human failure'. The influence of gender on the image of perpetrators of infanticide in the courtroom and crime reporting in the Netherlands, 1960–1989

Siska van der Plas and Willemijn Ruberg 

Department of History and Art History, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the representation of parents who killed their children in Dutch newspapers in 1960–1989. It concludes that infanticidal women were portrayed as irrational, ill, pathetic, and passive, as well as not fully responsible for their crimes. When they displayed emotions in court and proved their love for their children, journalists pitied them, thus underlining a traditional image of femininity and motherhood. Fathers, however, were initially depicted as cold-blooded and responsible for their selfish acts. Rationality took centre stage in these stories, which meant the press allocated more moral responsibility to fathers. If men showed emotions during the trial and there was proof of good fatherhood, they were described with more compassion. From the 1980s journalists demonstrated more sympathy for fathers' sense of powerlessness, dovetailing with new ideals of fatherhood. This confirms Joan Scott's notion of gender as a binary opposition, but shows how femininity, rather than masculinity, was the ideal and demonstrates how views on parenthood interact with (changing views on) gender in images of perpetrators of infanticide.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 January 2022


Accepted 30 March 2022

## KEYWORDS

Infanticide; gender; parenthood; motherhood; fatherhood

## 1. Introduction

For centuries people have been fascinated by parents who kill their children. Historians, as well, have tried to explain child murder in the past by placing this sometimes-baffling dead in cultural and socioeconomic contexts. So far historical research has mostly discussed mothers as perpetrators of neonaticide in the early modern period and nineteenth century, a period in which the position of unmarried mothers was extremely difficult and mostly young unmarried servant girls killed their babies out of desperation and shame. Dutch historians have hardly addressed child murder in the twentieth century, whereas this period makes for an interesting 'test case' since it may be expected that infanticide disappears with the impact of feminism, the welfare state as safety net, and a milder societal judgment of unmarried motherhood. However, this has not happened. Even in the twenty-first century each year 10 to 15 cases of child murder and child manslaughter are prosecuted in the Netherlands (Liem & Haarhuis, 2015). This fact raises the question whether the modern period is accompanied by less understanding for this crime. This

**CONTACT** Willemijn Ruberg  [W.G.Ruberg@uu.nl](mailto:W.G.Ruberg@uu.nl)

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

article researches how women and men who killed their children in the period 1960–1989 – hallmarked by significant shifts in women’s and men’s emancipation – were represented in Dutch newspapers.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the comparison between the two sexes can provide some insight into the contemporary gender norms.

Historical research into the connections between gender and crime has demonstrated that criminal law is filled with cultural images of masculinity and femininity, particularly in relation to the categories of perpetrator and victim (Arnot & Osborne, 1999; D’Cruze & Jackson, 2009; Van der Heijden & Pluskota, 2018). Whether female suspects in past and present were judged less severely on the basis of stereotypes on femininity, is subject to historical debate. Several criminologists, sociologists and historians have concluded that women received more lenient sentences on the basis of perceived typical feminine values such as irrationality and passivity (Pollak, 1950, pp. 149–153; Zedner, 1991, pp. 83–90; Van der Heijden & Pluskota, 2015). Other research, however, found that this lenient sentencing in court, but also the mild judgment by the press, depends on the type of crime and that the image is more complex than simply the relationship between gender and the severity of the sentence (Grabe et al., 2006; Weimann & Fishman, 1988). In this article, we aim to contribute to this debate, which mostly revolves around the judicial sentence that is meted out, by exploring the role of the media in depicting gender and punishment.

In her study into cases of infanticide that were tried in British courts between 1980 and 1990, criminologist Ania Wilczynski (1997b) found the presence of both a medical discourse and a paternalistic attitude towards female perpetrators. Narratives in legal documents portrayed different images of the child murderer – both male and female–: the perpetrator was described as bad, sad or mad. Because of the specific nature of the laws, British women received more lenient sentences and were more often acquitted: it was thought that mothers had to carry the burden of having killed their child throughout their lives, which was the worst possible punishment. In addition, women were regarded as more prone to mental or emotional problems; why else would a mother hurt her own child like that? British fathers were punished more severely, since they were seen as acting rationally or aggressively – perceived ‘masculine’ behaviour – and hence thought to be more responsible. Paternal child murderers were thus punished more severely than their female counterparts. Wilczynski concludes that in the legal verdict gender stereotypes played an influential role. Other international studies into the media representations of suspects of infanticide also show that gender stereotypes were significant (Cavaglioni, 2008, 2009; Grabe et al., 2006; Grey, 2015). This research raises the question whether similar gender stereotypes can be found in Dutch crime reporting.

For our analysis, two theoretical concepts are relevant. Firstly, the notion of gender as defined by Joan Scott: the cultural and historical construction of masculinity and femininity. Scott emphasized, like other gender historians, that in many cultures masculinity was the norm and was valued more positively than femininity (Scott, 1986, pp. 1063, 1073). Especially since the end of the eighteenth century, masculinity was connected to activity and rationality, whereas femininity was associated with emotionality and passivity (Streng, 1997, p. 10). In this article, we aim to show that rather femininity, and motherhood as its corollary, was the norm against which masculinity was compared. Secondly, we use the notion of gender performativity by philosopher Judith Butler. Butler pointed out that gender identity is not fixed or biological but has to be repeatedly performed on the basis of a cultural script, thus only making the impression of being natural and

unchangeable (Butler, 1990/1999). The courtroom is a space par excellence where suspects need to create an image of themselves: not only their crimes are on trial, also their social and cultural behaviour. The identity they present can be a conscious or unconscious performance, following (or rejecting) a script of cultural norms of femininity or masculinity, but also of good parenthood and of perpetrator or victim.

This qualitative research is based on newspaper reporting on infanticide in the form of coverage of court cases, reportages, and mentions of verdicts from an extensive selection of Dutch newspapers from various religious/political signatures (see [Appendix 1](#) for a discussion of the primary source selection). These newspaper articles inform us on the ways child murder was publicly assessed and on the progress of the trial. The term ‘infanticide’ includes several categories in Dutch law related to the age of the victim: neonaticide refers to the murder of a baby within 24 hours after birth, infanticide to the murder of a baby older than one day and filicide refers to child murder after the child has reached one year. In total, we have studied 296 newspaper articles on 71 cases of infanticide put on trial between 1960 and 1989. These newspaper articles do not simplistically reflect reality but were influenced by the political and social character of the editorial boards, their readers, and the journalists themselves (Cavaglion, 2009, p. 219; Goc, 2013; Wilkinson, 2020, pp. 103, 108–109). Reporters place the facts surrounding the child murder, the criminal trial and the verdict in a social and discursive frame, thus creating a certain image of the child killer: this image includes cultural ideas and expectations regarding masculinity, femininity, motherhood and fatherhood. In our analysis of the newspaper articles we have therefore paid attention to the choice of words, the structure of the texts, their contents and the headings (Van Dijk, 1998). In our research, we are primarily concerned with the representation of gender in the media, but the representation of suspects by lawyers and public prosecutors, as well as the judges’ verdicts, have also been scrutinized, to sketch the social and juridical verdict encountered by male and female suspects of child murder.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, we demonstrate that in newspapers in the period 1960–1989 women were judged more leniently than men. Women’s crimes were explained from their presumed mental instability, their insecurities, and the pressure they were under as mothers, as well as their fears of unmarried motherhood. Only when these women broke with stereotypical, traditional expectations on femininity and especially on motherhood, they could squander the benefits of this mild assessment. Men who acted more femininely in the courtroom and who presented themselves in accordance with new images of fatherhood, were, in contrast, depicted more positively in newspaper articles. As opposed to the premise in Scott’s gender analysis, femininity in this Dutch legal and media context was valued more positively than masculinity, pointing to the prevalence of feminine behaviour as norm for both fathers and mothers. Despite the presence of new ideas on femininity in this period, the image and norm of femininity in the media and the courtroom was still rather traditional in the Netherlands.

## 2. Infanticide in the historiography

Previous historical studies on the topic of child murder in the Netherlands have mainly researched this phenomenon during early modern times and the long nineteenth century, emphasizing the course of criminal procedures and socio-economic backgrounds of

perpetrators. Analogous to the legal definition of infanticide, historians have depicted child murder as a typically female crime, especially neonaticide – the killing of a newborn baby – (Ruberg, 2013, pp. 360, note 4). In early modern society strict norms on sexual behaviour were prevalent: all forms of ‘carnal intercourse’ should be limited to sexuality within marriage. Adultery and premarital sex were criminal acts and those guilty of this intolerable behaviour had to be punished publicly (Van der Heijden, 2014, pp. 137–139). Pregnancy was clear evidence of an unmarried woman’s sinful acts, through which she had wasted not only her honour but also lost her chances at a good life (Faber, 1978, p. 238). A growing belly could be hidden, but the sudden presence of a baby would cause a single mother severe difficulties. Neonaticide was inextricably entangled with the societal expectations of how a decent woman should behave.

When in the early modern period a case of neonaticide came to light, the female suspect was tried in court. Often the death penalty awaited her (Van der Heijden, 2014, p. 77; Noordam, 2014, pp. 31–32). The image we discern of these women from the legal records is connected to societal ideas on motherhood and sexuality. Harsh measures were taken against women who transgressed sexual norms and unbridled female sexuality was perceived as dangerous and disruptive to society (D’Cruze & Jackson, 2009, p. 65 and p. 142; Ermers, 1990, p. 118). Murdering mothers were also regarded as unnatural. Their crime went against female nature: they had lacked motherly love and a natural connection with their own child. This particular labelling of newborn child murder as ‘unnatural’ often occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is even included in the phrasing of an Amsterdam law, a ‘keur’, against neonaticide, which states that ‘it being a matter that even nature finds terrifying and abhorrent, as something that not even occurs amongst unreasonable beasts, it should be punished most severely to everyone’s warning’ (Van Nierop, 1959, pp. 154–155). Female child murderers were seen as women who had killed their babies to be able to lead a promiscuous life without interference.

In the eighteenth century, the attitude towards murdering mothers changed. Female sexual activity was no longer perceived as active and threatening but rather as passive and weak, and in the new Enlightened ideas these women came to be perceived as victims of men who had seduced them, leading them on with promises of marriage (D’Cruze & Jackson, 2009, pp. 65–142; Ermers, 1990, pp. 118–119). Deceived and fully aware of their disgrace they had been forced to kill out of desperation. From the mid-eighteenth century the death penalty in cases of infanticide was decreasingly put into practice and imprisonment became more common: in courts sympathy increased for the dire situation these women had felt trapped in (Noordam, 2014, pp. 31–32). Criminal law in the nineteenth century, however, stood in the way of compassion. In 1811, after the Netherlands had been absorbed into the French Empire, the French Code Pénal was introduced. Section 302 of this code posited that the crime of infanticide had to be punished with execution and the Code Pénal did not acknowledge mitigating circumstances. Yet, in the first half of the nineteenth century – in contrast to earlier periods – more women were acquitted than convicted for child murder, due to the uncertainty about their guilt raised by the question whether the baby had been born alive, in addition to the criticism of the high sentences (Ruberg, 2013, p. 364). The resistance against section 302 led to a revision of the Dutch law in 1854: no longer was infanticide punished with the death penalty, but with a sentence of five to ten years of labour in a house of correction.

This change in judicial reactions also reflected the acknowledgement of the influence of emotions on the mental and physical condition of women who had committed infanticide: by definition they were regarded as diminished accountable for their acts. The new criminal code from 1886 continues in this vein: sections 290 and 291, which are still applicable today, presume that both married and unmarried women who have killed their babies have acted from immense fear of their pregnancies or deliveries being discovered (Ermers, 1990, pp. 119–120). These nineteenth-century laws dovetail with the period's image of women not being steered by reason but by emotion. The assumption that this applied to neonaticide as well, made this particular crime into a privileged offense.<sup>3</sup> Dutch criminal law is, however, specific in who can use these mitigating circumstances. According to the formulation of the sections on child murder and child manslaughter, these can only be applied to neonaticidal women: the sections in the law speak of 'mothers who [...] kill their children during or shortly after birth on purpose'. These laws cannot pertain to murdering fathers, or mothers who commit infanticide or filicide: these can only be tried for murder or manslaughter, crimes that carry potentially much higher sentences. From the eighteenth century on the law has thus shown more compassion for the shame and fear experienced by mothers who kill their babies.

Although the Dutch laws on infanticide pay attention to a connection between body and mind, psychiatric expertise only gained influence in Dutch courtrooms during the twentieth century. This in contrast to England, where physicians and psychiatrists already played an important role in infanticide trials since 1822, with the attribution of puerperal insanity to neonaticidal mothers. Puerperal insanity explained this unimaginable deed committed by mothers as a result of the physical and psychological toll motherhood took on these women (Marland, 2002, p. 172; Quinn, 2002, pp. 195–197; Ruberg, 2013, p. 368). The late inclusion of psychiatric expertise in Dutch child murder trials does not mean that judges took no account of the suspects' state of mind; sections 290 and 291 recognize a connection between body and mind by paying attention to the emotions that women experienced shortly before, during and after the murder (Ruberg, 2013, pp. 374–376).

The picture sketched of child murder by Dutch historians tends to portray it as a women's crime born out of despair, by looking solely at neonaticide. But by using this frame to study the offence, cases of mothers killing older children and, above all, fathers accused of child murder have not received enough attention (Guarnieri, 2009). In the case of England, several historians have attempted to fill this gap in the literature. The research of among others Grey (2008), Wilson (2012), Shepherd (2013), Lister (2016), and Butler (2018) discusses child murder trials in a period spanning from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, with a focus on paternal child murder. Their investigations have shown that within discourses on child murder and the prosecution of parents, ideals on what 'good' or 'ideal' parenthood entailed profoundly influenced how murdering parents were treated and represented, especially in the case of fathers: where it was previously thought that only mothers could benefit from sympathy based on gendered presumptions, their combined studies show that fathers also received a lenient treatment in certain circumstances. The view on fatherhood during this specific period prescribed a breadwinner role for men; they were responsible for the upkeep of their family. In cases where previously good, hardworking and overall 'respectable' men killed their children, these studies discern how this association with providing renders that these men could be found guilty but insane. Fear of financial decline, unemployment and poverty; their failure

to live up to expectations of masculinity and fatherhood were thought to have triggered bouts of mental illness which resulted in the death of their children. Their criminal culpability was mitigated by these discourses and resulted in sympathy in court and press (Lister, 2016, pp. 225–226; Wilson, 2012, pp. 330–331; Shepherd, 2013, pp. 28–34; Butler, 2018, p. 7).<sup>4</sup>

These findings from studies of English child homicide cases have all the more shown how expectations on parenting play an influential role in the representation and the prosecution of child murderers.

### 3. Gender, parenthood, and family life

The expectations society places on parental attitudes towards their children play a significant role in the representation of child murderers. Strongly related to the construction of these parental roles are gendered norms: ideas of femininity and masculinity determine what is expected from mothers and fathers. But beside the fact that gender is socially constructed, it is also historically determined. After the end of the Second World War, Dutch society was focused on reconstruction including the rebuilding of Dutch families. ‘Family recovery is people’s recovery’, sounded one of the slogans with which citizens were urged to pick up the pre-war family ideal again. Dutch family life in the 1950s was therefore marked by a strong breadwinner regime, supported by the developing Dutch welfare state (Knijn & Selten, 2002, p. 173). Characterized by a strict gender division, both men and women had their own roles within the family: men were expected to be breadwinners, and to perform an authoritarian role that incorporated masculine ideals, such as self-control, reason, assertiveness, autonomy and responsibility. Fathers were ought to be stern and fatherly affection was conditional and had to be earned – motherly love, in contrast, should be unconditional. Women kept the family running; they were supposed to have a gentle and emotional nature and to be caring for and sensitive of the needs of others, qualities that connected these female ideals closely to the mother’s role, which was also regarded as their natural destiny (Brinkgreve, 1992, pp. 17–19 and p. 109; Duindam, 1997, pp. 11–14; Dudink, 1998, p. 422; Knijn, 1994, pp. 185–186).

Towards the end of the 1960s, several Western European countries saw a revival of feminism. This second feminist wave reached the Netherlands with the publication of the article ‘The discontent of women’ in 1967 by Joke Smit (1933–1981). This ‘discontent’, according to Smit, was based in women’s unequal opportunities in the labour market and their roles as housewives, imposed on them through marriage and motherhood, which prevented them from fully participating in society. Men, in turn, should develop their caring qualities in order to flourish. In the 1960s and 1970s, Dutch feminist groups were founded that targeted the traditional division of family roles, aiming at women’s autonomy and at breaking with conservative societal expectations in order to attain gender equality (Van de Loo, 2005, p. 20 and pp. 80–85; Doornenbal, 1996, pp. 14–15; De Vries, 1981).

In the 1970s and 1980s new ideas on mothers’ and fathers’ roles in the family were propounded, and caring was no longer seen to be merely the task of women. Educationalist Jeanette Doornenbal argues that during the second feminist wave the dominant image of the ‘exclusive, natural, present, loving mother’ lost its self-evidence (Doornenbal, 1996, pp. 14–15; Van de Loo, 2005, pp. 80–85; Tavecchio & van Dijken, 1998,



pp. 68–70; Knijn, 1994, pp. 183, p. 192). With this, an image of fatherhood also changed. Fathers were no longer solely seen as providers; it came to be expected from them, as well, to be emotionally involved in the raising of children and to actively contribute to their care and education. A strict gender division of tasks gave way to more fluid roles for fathers and mothers, thus both acknowledging labouring motherhood and caring fatherhood. Although these more egalitarian forms of parenthood would be new ideals for a younger generation, in the 1980s and 1990s not all couples put these ideals into practice (Doornenbal, 1996, pp. 15–17; Knijn & Selten, 2002, pp. 168–170, p. 177).

Although the Dutch laws on infanticide dating from 1886 have not changed, Dutch society has. The period under scrutiny in this article – the 1960s to the 1980s – is characterized by shifting ideas on the position of women within society, while at the same time the role of men and fathers was given a new meaning. We will show that these changing views on gender, especially regarding the new role of fathers, left traces in media reporting of fathers as perpetrators of child murder.

#### 4. An analysis of newspaper reporting on cases of infanticide

To analyze the representation of gender in cases of infanticide we have collected 297 newspaper articles devoted to 71 cases of child murder that took place between 1960 and 1989. These articles have different shapes: some report news on a recently discovered case of child murder or on a judicial verdict; others are detailed bulletins listing neighbours' insights. In addition, our research mostly uses reports of court cases, in which journalists based their chronicles on their observations of the perpetrator's (unconscious) behaviour in the witness dock, leading to a large overlap between the narratives presented in the courtroom and those written down in newspaper articles. However, newspapers were not produced in a social vacuum and crime reporting is influenced by a changing political-social context – and in turn impacts on that context. Societal views on crime and punishment determine the extent and type of attention paid to the criminal's personality. In the 1960s and late 1980s, journalists wrote in detail on crime and suspects, first steered by the ideal of resocialization and later by a strong plea for a better legal position for suspects and convicts. In the early 1970s societal debate on the severity of punishment left traces in the critical and more emotional tone found in newspaper reporting, shifting to a more concise and matter-of-fact quality in the course of the 1980s (Bolt et al., 2019, pp. 205–230). But differences in style and tone can also be discerned between newspapers: *De Telegraaf*, *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* and *Het Vrije Volk* generally discuss cases of child murder in more detail and in a more sensationalized style, whereas newspapers such as *de Volkskrant*, *Trouw* and *Het Parool* use a more business-like style and for the most part discuss what happens in the courtroom.

Still, generally the contents of crime reporting of all these newspapers are not vastly different; in reports on specific cases of infanticide the narratives often contain the same elements. Especially compared to the sensationalized style of some British newspapers, the Dutch press's tone showed considerably more restraint: Dutch reporters during this period seem to follow institutional narratives, relying on official sources such as police investigations and trial proceedings (Wilkinson, 2020, pp. 114–121, pp. 181–182). Beside a sparing use of sensationalized narratives, it was unusual for newspapers to mention the



names of their reporters; all studied newspaper articles, with the exception of eleven articles, were published anonymously. And in contrast to earlier periods, the religious and socio-political backgrounds of these late-twentieth century newspapers hardly left any traces in the articles.

In addition to changing societal ideas on crime and punishment and the different character of the newspapers, the perception of suspects is also influenced by cultural discourses on gender. By means of a discourse analysis, we have researched how a gender discourse can be traced in the conscious and unconscious choices that were made in wording, headings and contents of newspaper reporting on child murder. These elements inform us on reporters' attitudes towards perpetrators and on the influence of ideas on masculinity and femininity, motherhood and fatherhood on the tone of the articles. How were gender norms, language and style used to trigger the readers' understanding or indignation of the parents' actions?<sup>5</sup> We have paid particular attention to the space devoted in articles to mitigating circumstances and the perpetrator's guilt. For example, in a case from 1969 revolving around a mother who had beaten her young son to death, *De Telegraaf* dwelled on the difficult and stressful position the woman had been in and the factors that had eventually pushed her over the edge: 'Mother needs help after beating child to death' was the article's heading. *De Tijd* attracted readers with the header: 'Much understanding for distraught mothers: young son (1,5) killed in desperation'. Both articles sketch an image of this mother's irrationality, both in the contents and in the headers accompanying the text, and emphasize the professional help she needed, thus alleviating her guilt.<sup>6</sup> In a similar case, this time it was a father who had beaten his young daughter to death, *De Telegraaf* spoke of a man who 'cooled off his irritability on a defenseless baby', the reporter thus morally judging the act.<sup>7</sup> Looking closer at these two different, yet similar cases, we can see how reporters viewed and described the perpetrators in a distinct manner; where the mother is treated leniently, with regard to her feminine nature, the father's behaviour is condemned by the reporter because the general view is that he should have known better. The portrayal of child murderers shows patterns when it comes to both male and female perpetrators; in the following sections, we discuss these patterns and explain the role of gender in these media portrayals.

## 5. Murdering mothers

In an attempt to explain the baffling acts of parents in cases of child murder reporters sketched an image of the crime and the perpetrator. What had driven these parents to kill their children? Had it been a coldblooded murder, an act of desperation or had it happened in a spell of madness? The images and tone in the texts were closely connected to gender norms and parental expectations. A traditional image of femininity and motherhood is based on the idea that women are caring and sweet, and that they love their children unconditionally. In newspaper articles on 37 cases of murdering mothers, we see a trend to depict these women mildly and with compassion: reporters tone down the question of guilt in these cases.

In the courtroom, this tendency is present as well: when we look at the sentences meted out in cases of child murder, we see that mothers were regarded as less accountable for this crime than fathers. This trend returns in the length of the prison sentences

**Table 1.** Average number of months in prison imposed in child murder cases.

	Women			Men		
	Avg. penalty	Lowest penalty	Highest penalty	Avg. penalty	Lowest penalty	Highest penalty
<b>Child murder</b>						
Neonaticide	5,5	14 days	12	-	-	-
Infanticide	8	4	24	43	3	120
Filicide	12	4	60	49	10	180
<b>Image</b>						
Mentally defective	10	10	10	48	12	180
Pitiful	12	14 days	60	20	3	60
Bad	14	0	60	66	6	144

(see, Table 1),<sup>8</sup> but also in the judicial measures ordering psychiatric treatment and the accompanying estimated danger of recidivism. As discussed earlier, the influence of psychiatric expertise in Dutch child murder cases was only established in the twentieth century (Ruberg, 2021). During the period we study, it was fairly common for the court to call in forensic psychiatrists to examine the mental state of the accused parent in order to establish if the murder could be attributed to mental instability and the suspect was to be held accountable for his or her actions. The outcome of the psychiatric examination was most of the times discussed openly in the courtroom, where experts were summoned to further clarify their findings on the behaviour of the accused, or the judge could rule that the psychiatric report would be discussed behind closed doors – thus barring the public. Reporters often globally described the findings of the psychiatric examination and depending on the newspaper, they delved more into specific or specialist details of the expert's opinion. One of the outcomes of these psychiatric examinations could be that forensic psychiatrists declared the accused to be partially or fully unaccountable for their actions, after which the court could impose detention under hospital orders (TBS). This order consists of compulsory psychiatric treatment which a person receives in a secure, closed institution; a forensic psychiatric centre to protect society from their potential danger. Detention under hospital order combines a prison sentence with placement in a psychiatric institution; in other countries people are often sentenced to one of both institutions, and this combination of both in a forensic hospital is unique to the Netherlands. Mothers were somewhat more often placed in psychiatric hospitals (13% compared to 7%) and fathers were ordered to TBS more often (18% compared to 11%) (see, Table 2). This can be explained by the extent to which the judges regarded the parent as dangerous to others. Women were often assessed as dangerous to themselves; consumed by guilt they would sooner hurt themselves and by admitting them to a psychiatric hospital they could be taken care of and supervised. Men, on the other hand, were more often committed in TBS clinics to safeguard society against them.<sup>9</sup>

A returning image in newspaper reporting is that of the mother as mentally defective, or mad. In eleven out of 37 cases (30%) the focus is on the mother's mental condition at the time of the crime. In the course of the nineteenth century women's criminal behaviour had been increasingly pathologized, thus taking away their guilt since it was seen to be their emotional, irrational character that drove women to their crimes, not evil intentions (Zedner, 1991, pp. 83–90; Van der Heijden & Schmidt, 2018, pp. 61–63; Wilczynski, 1997a, p. 123). This notion is reflected in the cases of child murder often involving older and sometimes multiple children, reporters emphasizing that these were good, caring

**Table 2.** Overview of the number of cases of placement in a psychiatric hospital (with dismissal from prosecution) and a TBS measure (detention under hospital orders).

	Women (n = 37)		Men (n = 34)	
	TBS	Placement in a psychiatric hospital	TBS	Placement in a psychiatric hospital
<b>Childmurder</b>				
Neonaticide	3–8%	-	-	-
Infanticide	2–5%	1–3%	7–21%	1–3%
Filicide	3–8%	8–21%	6–16%	4–12%
<b>Percentage</b>				
Within gender	21%	24%	38%	15%
Within all child murder cases	11%	13%	18%	7%

mothers who – in ‘a moment of insanity’ had thought to act in their children’s best interests. The following case from 1966, in which a mother was accused of having murdered her five children, illustrates this. Shortly after this ‘tragedy’, reporters travelled to the village where the family had lived. ‘She was a good mother who dearly loved her children’, the reporter of the *Limburgsch Dagblad* wrote after having talked to people who knew the woman: she faithfully attended church and took good care of her children, who always looked neat – despite money problems – and who didn’t lack anything. But she was about to emigrate to another country with her family, her husband working abroad, and this perspective triggered a ‘frantic fear’ regarding her children’s future and their safety – an obsession ending in this ‘tragedy’.<sup>10</sup>

In a similar case from 1979 a mother murdered her young son before she attempted suicide; she did not see a future for herself anymore but had not been able to leave the child without its mother. The court and the press described this woman as having had the feeling of failing in every single respect: ‘as housewife, as human being and as spouse.’<sup>11</sup> ‘Also the protests and demands of the women’s liberation movement would have brought her off balance’, *De Telegraaf* pointed to the origin of her insecurity. ‘She thought she did not by far fulfill the feminist image of the ideal woman.’<sup>12</sup> The explicit mentioning of feminism was exceptional in the cases we studied, but the fear that led these women to decide that their children were better off dead, returns in the other ten cases in different forms. Crime reporting focused on these women’s obsession with their children’s well-being, the fear to deprive them and a motherly urge to protect them whatever the cost.

Another, often recurring manner in which mothers were depicted in these newspapers – underlining their irrationality – is as desperate and pitiful women (Wilczynski, 1997b, p. 424). This narrative dominates in 18 cases (48%). Although far-reaching mental problems did not apply to these women, reporters paid attention to other underlying stressors driving their acts, thus generating sympathy for these murdering mothers. In an attempt to deal with insecure or terrifying situations and a sense of powerlessness, they had acted against their feminine/motherly nature.

Although fright and stress were emotions that played a role in both neonaticide and the murder of older children, the motives for these two types of crime also differed, if only because the fear of discovery of pregnancy was absent in the latter. Eleven out of thirteen mothers who committed neonaticide were part of the group of ‘sad’ or ‘pitiful’ women. The laws specifically on neonaticide highlight the mother’s emotional upheaval,

stemming from her fear of her pregnancy becoming publicly known. Articles on these cases, however, hardly mentioned the mental effects of this fear.<sup>13</sup> Reporters rather zoomed in on the reasons why they were afraid of their pregnancy being found out. Although the movement for women's emancipation contributed to a new mentality regarding female sexuality and motherhood, these neonaticidal mothers followed traditional norms: for them, unmarried motherhood was still accompanied by shame. In the courtroom, especially in the 1980s, judges, prosecutors and lawyers responded with astonishment to the drastic nature of this desperate escape. Weren't there other solutions, such as adoption?<sup>14</sup> And why had they not taken preventive measures if they had not wanted a child?<sup>15</sup> A widow who was on trial received little understanding for her fear from a prosecutor:

How on earth is it possible that this happens in a modern society that accepts unmarried mothers? She saw no solution to her situation, even though she was in contact with the Salvation Army. She has missed the boat to modernity.<sup>16</sup>

This exchange, however, was an exception, overall media representations of neonaticide mostly remained sympathetic, newspaper articles depicting remorseful and weeping women. 'Together with the understanding presiding judge, the crying, heartbroken girl reconstructed the deeply tragic case', a reporter wrote in 1965 on one of these women. She had killed her baby because she was afraid of losing her boyfriend if her condition came to light, since he was not the father. 'Deeply bent over', she left the courtroom, 'undoubtedly scarred for life'.<sup>17</sup> In cases like these, articles ponder over the emotions and remorse shown by these women. The fact that they had carried fear and shame for months made them victims of this tragic event as well.<sup>18</sup>

Generally, more understanding was felt for those women who in a state of panic had smothered their newborn babies than for mothers who had violently killed their older children. Aggressive acts were not seen as normal for mothers, and yet the case of a mother who had lethally wounded her child did not necessarily imply she was breaking social conventions so vehemently for her to be considered as bad. On the contrary, in four out of a total of seven cases of fatal physical abuse by the mother, reporters sum up the mitigating circumstances explaining her violence, making her into a sad and pitiful specimen. Take for instance, the case of a mother having smashed her daughter's skull. The autopsy had shown that the child was suffering from a painful condition causing continuous fits of crying and tantrums. On the fatal day, the child could not stop shrieking and her 'inability to take away the cause of the screaming' made the desperate mother throw the child onto the floor, as reporters noted down.<sup>19</sup> Violent mothers like this woman, described with sympathy, were depicted as good mothers who felt they were completely failing at motherhood, their pent-up emotions erupting as aggression. The press did not take them to account for this but explained this behaviour from their emotional nature.

In addition to their emotional and irrational nature, women's passive character was also highlighted in reporting on cases of child murder. In a number of cases, those who were morally complicit, such as their husbands or their own mothers, were blamed more strongly than the perpetrator – the mother. The fact that mothers were not regarded as

fully accountable (in the media) also perspires from the attention paid by the press to underlying causes having driven the mother to desperation and to the ways their emotions and attitude in the courtroom is described.

In eight cases (22%) women were not treated compassionately by the newspapers. Reporters portrayed them as morally guilty. Whenever the press or one of the legal actors in the courtroom classified a mother's motive as selfish, the act of child murder undermined the idea of female irrationality and unconditional motherly love. Often this was triggered by an apparent violation of emotional norms. For example, in 1972 it was discovered that a mother had poisoned her young son to save her own skin: the boy was not the child by her husband but by a family friend, with whom she had had a relationship for years. Increasingly, the boy had taken after his biological father and to avoid this being noticed, his mother decided to get rid of him. *De Volkskrant* described her as 'greedy' and 'ruthless': her urge for self-preservation had been larger than her love for her child. Importantly, the suspect had suggested to the police that her son had perhaps fallen ill because he had eaten something picked up from the street.<sup>20</sup> Because of this latter suggestion, the mother in this case was treated differently than the mother who had killed her baby in 1965: the crimes of both women served to hide something from their partners, but one woman showed remorse whereas the other kept denying her own responsibility. The latter behaviour was regarded as a well-thought-out plan, not as an irrational act committed in a fit of desperation or madness.

Negative media representations of murdering mothers emphasized their calculated behaviour and their lack of warmth, caring and other feminine/motherly attributes, as testified by certain characteristics of the murder and their conduct in the witness dock. Their acts had rather been rational: they had overseen the consequences of their deeds and did not show any remorse or grief. The general demand for remorse here strengthened gendered norms on motherhood and femininity so prevalent in cases of child murder. The women's conduct severely broke with gender norms and they therefore did not deserve mitigating circumstances in newspaper articles.

## 6. Murdering fathers

In cases of child murder in which the perpetrator was male these fathers were mostly negatively portrayed. In their representation, the calculating or violent character of their crimes takes centre stage, the crime thus shaped as coldblooded murder or a case of uncontrolled aggression and the perpetrator as an evil man. While women generally benefit from gendered expectations, these typically work to the detriment of men.

The traditional equation of masculinity with reason plays a big role in reporting on 15 (44%) of the total of 34 cases of child murder in which the father stood trial; it was thought their acts were more premeditated than those of mothers. This presumption surfaces often in cases in which the murder is interwoven with (imminent) divorces and custody cases. Mostly men are thought to have acted out of retaliation (18% of men compared to 5% of women), a finding that corresponds to the research by Koenraadt and Liem, who describe these retaliatory killings as attempts of men to regain control over their families and partners (Koenraadt & Liem, 2008, pp. 19–21, 170–171). In 1973, a man was arrested for murdering one of his young sons and quickly newspaper articles were published on this case, speculating on the suspect's motive. Shortly before he killed his child, custody

over both sons had been allocated to their mother. A reporter from *De Telegraaf* explored the suspect's 'narrowing of consciousness' but also pointed to his potential 'revengeful thoughts' to explain the crime. The man had attempted to try 'to hurt his wife in her dearest possession' with his 'evil plan'.<sup>21</sup> Crime reporting here and in other cases emphasized the jealousy, the lack of self-control and the conscious choice made by fathers to sacrifice their children to their own vindictiveness; a despicable and selfish choice, which rendered them morally blameworthy.

Other cases in which fathers had to account themselves for their child's death concern excessive violence and structural abuse: in 15 cases of child murder (44%) this was of central importance, and eleven men were depicted negatively. Although aggression was regarded as masculine, reporters heavily blamed fathers when their children fell victim to their aggressive temper. Fathers' violence was described in newspaper articles with terms such as 'rage' and 'wild fury'. The men in the dock themselves located the cause of these emotions in the behaviour of the young victims: the child did not want to eat, had dirtied the diaper directly after changing or cried too much.<sup>22</sup> In the texts, these men were accused of not being able to carry out small caring tasks without losing their patience with their children. They were 'unfit for fatherhood'<sup>23</sup>; in strong contrast with the mothers who lethally abused their children for similar reasons, and yet were portrayed as desperate and pitiful mothers.

Like women's behaviour, these men's attitudes and emotions were dissected in trial reports. In the courtroom they did not display remorse over their acts, only when they were confronted with the consequences of those acts, such as a prison sentence or forced committal to a (forensic) psychiatric clinic. In a case of child murder from 1966 reporters considered the 'horrifying coldness' of the father's deeds. He had battered his baby to death since he suspected his wife of infidelity and while she – crying – reconstructed the events of that fatal evening, he listened to her 'without any emotion'. A 'cold narcissist', the psychiatrists judged.<sup>24</sup> This sentiment was also present in a case of a father who had fatally beaten his young son because the child's physical development lagged behind other children his age. 'I had to teach him to walk. And yes, sometimes I would hit hem', said this man. He himself denied structural abuse and considered his approach fairly normal, while in the courtroom attendants thought differently about the 'perverted' behaviour of this man. 'The man assaulted an innocent child in his care,' concluded the prosecutor.<sup>25</sup> These fathers' lack of remorse and denial of guilt increased the moral guilt the press attributed to them.

Not all men who killed their children were depicted as bad in these articles: in seven cases (21%) the father's pathological mental condition was underlined, thus mitigating the fathers' guilt in four cases (12%). The representation of the father killing his child rested for a large part on stereotypes on femininity, as is demonstrated by a case from 1960. The father suffered from fits of 'long-lasting melancholy', a result of traumatic episodes from his youth and one of these fits had led to his young daughter's death. The periods of depression, described in the press as 'a surge of melancholia' and a 'hysterical explosion' – terms historically connected to femininity – were mentioned to emphasize that this man's behaviour diverged from the male norm of rationality.<sup>26</sup> However, a thin line existed between a positive and a negative representation of male child murderers, for a large part explained by the emotions and remorse demonstrated by the father during the trial. Affect had a mitigating effect: an emotional man strengthened

the idea that he was not as rational as was assumed. Similarly to women, the general demand for remorse became entangled with gender norms and could, in the case of men, soften the presumption of male aggressive and rational behaviour.

Newspapers tended to portray murdering fathers negatively, but from the mid-1980s a shift can be detected towards the circumstances of the crime, such as these men's incapacity to deal with critique from relatives, disappointment or work-related stress. Their suppression of these feelings had led to an explosion of emotion, often when a child relentlessly kept crying, and these conditions were regarded as mitigating. Although reporters not always concluded that these fathers deserved compassion, in 12 cases (35%) they did express pity for their powerlessness and desperation at the time of the crime. Moreover, in the course of the 1970s and 1980s more attention was paid to the role of men in the family; a less harsh representation included fathers who invested emotionally in their bonds with their children.

Paradoxically, this new ideal of fatherhood led to a more understanding perception of fathers when they did not conform to this new ideal but had tried to be caring and expressing their feelings – as was the case with mothers who had failed but had tried to conform to an ideal of motherhood.

Newspaper articles on two cases from the 1980s show that fathers could expect most sympathy when they had acted from desperation, fearing the loss of their child. The court did not mildly judge a man who had suffocated his young son in 1989 as it became clear that the mother wanted to take the child from the father.<sup>27</sup> Reporters, however, perceived extenuating circumstances in the man's sole responsibility for the household and raising the boy, while his wife 'lay on the couch and did not offer a helping hand, humiliating and commanding her husband.'<sup>28</sup> The press sketched an image of a loving father who had endured the whims of his wife because he wanted to stay with his child. When his fear of being separated from his child seemed to become reality, the man became 'desperate' and 'completely upset' and decided that he and his son were better off dying together.<sup>29</sup> Newspaper articles emphasized the man's emotions and the irrationality with which he desperately seemed to solve his problems: aggression or a lust for revenge were not mentioned.

To conclude, newspapers outlined an understanding image of men when they expressed their love for their children and showed remorse for their crimes, in short when they tried to comply with the new expectations of fatherhood which came close to what was defined by Dutch society in the 1970s and 1980s as 'feminine' or 'motherly' behaviour. This is quite extraordinary considering that from the later 1970s and 1980s interest in the personal background of the suspect and understanding for his motives decreased, while demand for harsh punishment augmented. Journalists wrote more succinctly and business-like about court cases in the 1980s, becoming more concerned about recidivism and danger to society than about the suspect's biography (Bolt et al., 2019, pp. 228–229). The media's interest in fathers' emotions therefore testifies both to the importance of the new ideals of masculinity but also to the public sentiment attached to cases of infanticide.

To the extent in which we can compare this new understanding with sentencing in these cases, we see a slight overall shortening of prison sentences (varying between two and five years). Most notable, however, is an increase in the number of fathers who were referred to a psychiatric hospital; which deemed them as more dangerous to themselves



than to the rest of society. The latter point differs from Wilczynski's findings study on sentencing in British infanticide cases in the 1980s, where fathers received the most coercive form of psychiatric treatment comparable to TBS (Wilczynski, 1997b, p. 422).

## 7. Conclusion

On the one hand, the infanticide laws formulated in 1886, meant to protect pregnant, unmarried girls who, overwhelmed by fear and panic, killed their babies, have not changed. On the other hand, the period 1960–1989 witnessed fundamental change regarding women's and men's emancipation. Both trends are visible in the media representation of parents who killed their children. Clearly the early modern association of women and sinful sexuality has disappeared. But even though in a number of cases a clear consciousness of new ideals of womanhood and fatherhood perspires, generally a traditional image of femininity remains dominant in the perception of murdering mothers, while it is noticeable that in cases of neonaticide, the women themselves still experienced shame at the prospect of unmarried motherhood.

Women who killed their children were portrayed as irrational, ill, pathetic, passive and (partially) unaccountable for their crimes, the latter also because of tough personal circumstances. Mothers who in a state of anxiety had smothered their newborn babies were generally depicted more compassionately than mothers who had violently killed their older children. When women showed their emotions in the courtroom and presented evidence of their love for their offspring they could count on the reporters' sympathy. Fathers accused of murdering their children, however, were depicted in the newspapers as coldblooded and as responsible for their own deliberate and selfish acts. Rationality took centre stage here, men being blamed morally more than women. When men showed their emotions during the trial, and presented evidence that they had tried to be a good father, they were represented with more compassion. From the 1980s newspaper articles testified to more understanding for fatherly impotence and for the role of men in the family. The image of masculinity in cases of infanticide can thus be seen to have changed somewhat in the Netherlands, similar to an increasing importance attached to fatherhood in Britain from the mid-twentieth century (King, 2012).

On the one hand, masculinity and femininity can therefore be regarded as binary opposites, as also presented in Scott's notion of gender. Here, emotion is associated with femininity and reason or acting rationally with men. On the other hand, the image of masculinity was shifting: by the 1980s, rational or aggressive masculinity was not unequivocally taken to be the standard anymore. Showing emotions, especially remorse and parental love, by then had become the norm for men and women. But whereas Butler argued that social norms on gender and sexuality limited individual behaviour and people only have the option to either repeat these norms or parody them (but not perform them completely differently), both sexes did have some leeway to 'perform' a gender role in the courtroom and newspaper articles on child murder show that this performance was not only based on a script on gender but also included a script based on ideals of good parenthood. Showing 'feminine' emotions and being a good parent, had become ideals for both fathers and mothers by the 1980s. In the courtroom, both sexes performed these roles and could tend more towards 'feminine' emotion or

towards 'masculine' reason or aggression. Reporters rewarded a 'feminine' performance highlighting emotions and love for the child and berated 'masculine' behaviour (acting coolly, selfishly and aggressively).

Whereas historical and criminological research has mainly analyzed gender images relating to sentences, we have argued that gender differences can be found in the media as well, and in the period 1960–1989 these can be qualified mostly as traditional. Further research should explore whether bigger changes can be traced in more recent decades as well.

## Funding

This work was supported by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 770402).

## Notes

1. Because of the presumed degree of change regarding gender and sexuality from 1967, but especially in the 1970s and early 1980s in the Netherlands, the start and end points – 1960 and 1989 – were chosen to explore the actual influence of these changes on this specific crime; it enabled us to track continuity and change over a longer period of time.
2. Since verdicts and court files have not been studied, it is impossible to reconstruct the direct influence of gender stereotypes on the courts' verdicts.
3. In case of child manslaughter (Art. 290 Sr) a mother can be sentenced to a maximum of six years in prison, in case of child murder (Art. 291 Sr) to a maximum of nine years.
4. Clare Wilkinson, studying representations of violence in Dutch newspapers, affirmed this pattern of murderous fathers in the Netherlands during 1880–1930 (Wilkinson, 2020, pp. 185–193).
5. Our approach to discourse analysis is comparable to Teun Van Dijk (1998), pp. 21–22 and pp. 31–45; and Wilkinson (2020), pp. 38–39.
6. 'Moeder heeft hulp nodig na doodslaan kind', *de Volkskrant* (6 August 1969), 5; 'Veel begrip voor radeloze moeder: zoontje (1,5) in wanhoop gedood', *De Tijd* (6 August 1969) 3.
7. 'Carolientje's huilen irriteerde hem: vader doodde zijn eigen kind', *De Telegraaf* (3 July 1964) 5.
8. While newspaper articles do not provide the perfect means of looking at the punishment of child murder cases – because the final and definitive sentence was not always announced in every case and the correct legal terms did not always end up in the newspaper – they do offer some insight into the big picture.
9. These findings dovetail with the research by Koenraadt and Liem (2008, p. 23) into the judicial preliminary investigations made by the Pieter Baan Centrum in cases of child murder between 1953–2004 and the clinical and forensic-psychological research by Verheugt (2007, p. 162) on murdering parents in 1994–2003.
10. 'Moeder beroofde vijf kinderen in slaap van leven. Millingen geschokt door drama', *Limburgsch Dagblad* (3 November 1966) p. 1 and p. 3; 'Vliegrees geboekt voor omgebrachte kinderen. Daad ingegeven door angst voor de toekomst', *de Volkskrant* (4 November 1966) p. 5.
11. 'Eis tbr tegen moeder voor doden kleuter: daad niet aanrekenen', *Het Parool* (6 January 1980) 7.
12. Eric G. Koch, 'Gedwongen verpleging voor "normale vrouw"', *De Telegraaf* (17 January 1979) 3.
13. Similar observations were made by Wilkinson (2020, p. 191) based on newspapers and by Koenraadt (2003, pp. 201, p. 209) based on court files.
14. 'Eis van acht maanden tegen moeder die baby doodde', *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* (10 March 1983) 3; 'Weduwe dood uit angst voor roddels', *Het Vrije Volk* (13 July 1968) 3.
15. 'Voorwaardelijke straf geëist voor doden baby', *de Volkskrant* (4 February 1989) 7.
16. Quote from: 'Weduwe dood uit angst voor roddels', *Het Vrije Volk* (13 July 1968) 3.

17. 'Lichte eis tegen een paria: meisje doodde haar baby in wanhoopsbui', *Limburgsch Dagblad* (22 October 1965) 13.
18. This is the case for 11 out of the 13 cases (77%).
19. 'Vrouw (28) sloeg haar baby dood', *De Telegraaf* (17 March 1976) 6.
20. 'Moeders gif werd Eddie (5) fataal', *De Telegraaf* (21 June 1972) 7; "'Ik wilde mijn man alleen ziek maken'", *Het Vrije Volk* (21 June 1972) 13.
21. 'Arts sneed zoontje de keel door', *De Telegraaf* (30 June 1974) 1.
22. 'Opperman sloeg dochtertje dood', *Limburgsch Dagblad* (4 August 1971) 3 en 'Vader (22) doodt zijn baby om vieze luiër', *De Telegraaf* (3 February 1982) p. 3.
23. 'Vader gooit zijn baby dood/Vader doodt zijn baby in drift', *De Telegraaf* (6 August 1965) p. 1 and p. 4; 'Vader (22) doodt zijn baby om vieze luiër'.
24. 'Acht jaar geëist voor dood baby', *Het Parool* (18 January 1966) p. 9; 'Eis van acht jaar voor baby-moord', *Limburgsch Dagblad* (18 January 1966) p. 13.
25. 'Vader ranselde kind af dat niet leerde lopen', *Limburgsch dagblad* (22 October 1969) p. 17; 'Vader doodt zoontje door mishandeling: eis 2 jaar', *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* (22 October 1969) p. 3.
26. 'Vader doodde zijn kind "in trance"', *Het Vrije Volk* (1 June 1960) p. 9; 'Gendringse kindermoord voor de rechter', *De Waarheid* (1 June 1960) p. 3; 'Man doodde baby in vlaag van waanzin', *Het Parool* (1 June 1960) p. 9; 'Officier eist opname in gesticht: man doodde zijn kind in angstpsychose', *De Telegraaf* (1 June 1960) p. 7.
27. 'Een zielige, zwakke man, die nog maar één uitweg zag, maar dat excuseert hem absoluut niet', was het oordeel van de aanklager. Fred Soeteman, 'Kleine Detlef voor slapengaan gewurgd', *De Telegraaf* (11 October 1989) p. 8.
28. 'Kind gewurgd na gezinsdrama: eis zes jaar in "zaak die ons met afschuw vervult"', *Het Vrije Volk* (11 October 1989) p. 5.
29. Fred Soeteman, 'Kleine Detlef voor slapengaan gewurgd', *De Telegraaf* (11 October 1989) p. 8; Kind gewurgd na gezinsdrama: eis zes jaar in 'zaak die ons met afschuw vervult', *Het Vrije Volk* (11 October 1989) p. 5.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Willemijn Ruberg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9156-8889>

## References

- Arnot, M. L., & Osborne, C. (1999). Why gender and crime? Aspects of an international debate. In M. L. Arnot & C. Osborne (Eds.), *Gender and crime in modern Europe* (pp. 1–43). Routledge.
- Bolt, T., Gijzeman, J., & Vijselaar, J. (2019). *Ter observatie genomen. Pieter Baan Centrum, 1949-2019*. Boom.
- Brinkgreve, C. (1992). *De vrouw en het badwater: Over de lusten en lasten van het moderne (vrouwen) leven*. Meulenhoff.
- Butler, J. (1999 [1990]). *Gender trouble. Feminism and the subversion of identity* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2018). *Representations of paternal child killing in English national newspapers, 1900 to 1939* [PhD thesis]. University of Liverpool.
- Cavaglioni, G. (2008). Bad, mad or sad? Mothers who kill and press coverage in Israel. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*, 4(2), 271–278. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659008092332>
- Cavaglioni, G. (2009). Fathers who kill and press coverage in Israel. *Child Abuse Review*, 18(2), 127–143. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.1028>

- D'Cruze, S., & Jackson, L. A. (2009). *Women, crime and justice in England since 1660*. Palgrave.
- De Vries, P. (1981). Feminism in the Netherlands. *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 4(4), 389–407. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-0685\(81\)95948-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-0685(81)95948-0)
- Doornenbal, J. (1996). *Ouderschap als onderneming. Moeders en vaders over opvoeden in de jaren negentig*. Jan van Arkel.
- Dudink, S. (1998). The trouble with men: Problems in the history of masculinity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 1(3), 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136754949800100307>
- Duindam, V. (1997). *Zorgende vaders. Over mannen en ouderschap, zorg, werk en hulpverlening*. Uitgeverij Van Gennep.
- Ermers, J. (1990). En om de vrouw verging het kind. Kindermoord in de negentiende eeuw. *Nemesis*, 6(3), 114–122. <https://hdl.handle.net/11653/art202846>
- Faber, S. (1978). Kindermoord, in het bijzonder in de achttiende eeuw te Amsterdam. *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review*, 93(2), 224–240. <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-1chr.2033>
- Goc, N. (2013). *Women, infanticide, and the press, 1822-1922: News narratives in England and Australia*. Ashgate.
- Grabe, M. E., Trager, K. D., Lear, M., & Rauch, J. (2006). Gender in crime news: A case study test of the chivalry hypothesis. *Mass Communication and Society*, 9(2), 137–163. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327825mcs0902\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327825mcs0902_2)
- Grey, D. (2008). *Discourses on infanticide in England, 1880-1922* [PhD thesis]. University of Surrey.
- Grey, D. (2015). Agonised weeping: Representing femininity, emotion and infanticide in Edwardian newspapers. *Media History*, 21(4), 468–480. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2015.1047332>
- Guarnieri, P. (2009). Men committing female crime: Infanticide, family and honor in Italy, 1890-1981. *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés/Crime, History & Societies*, 13(2), 41–54. <https://doi.org/10.4000/chs.1108>
- King, L. (2012). Hidden fathers? The significance of fatherhood in mid-twentieth-century Britain. *Contemporary British History*, 26(1), 25–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2012.656385>
- Knijf, T. (1994). Social dilemmas in images of motherhood in the Netherlands. *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 1(2), 183–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135050689400100204>
- Knijf, T., & Selten, P. (2002). Transformations of fatherhood: The Netherlands. In B. Hobson (Ed.), *Making men into fathers* (pp. 168–190). Cambridge University Press.
- Koenraadt, F. A. M. M. (2003). Doding van een pasgeborene; een verborgen delict. In T. I. Oei & M. S. Groenhuijsen (Eds.), *Actuele ontwikkelingen in de forensische psychiatrie* (pp. 201–226). Kluwer.
- Koenraadt, F., & Liem, M. (2008). Kinderen als fataal slachtoffer van eigen ouders. In F. Koenraadt & M. Liem (Eds.), *Het kind als slachtoffer. Patronen en preventie van (fataal) geweld in gezinsverband* (pp. 11–30). Rozenberg.
- Liem, M., & Haarhuis, S. (2015). De epidemiologie van kinderdoding in Nederland, 2009-2014. *Tijdschrift voor Veiligheid*, 14(304), 56–77. <https://doi.org/10.5553/TvV/1872794820150140304004>
- Lister, A. (2016). *Masculinity and fatherhood in representations of male-perpetrated child homicide in London, 1889-1913* [PhD thesis]. Monash University.
- Marland, H. (2002). Getting away with murder? Puerperal insanity, infanticide and the defence plea. In M. Jackson (Ed.), *Infanticide. Historical perspectives on child murder and concealment, 1550-2000* (pp. 168–192). Ashgate.
- Noordam, D. J. (2014). 'Volgens Goddelijke en menselijke wetten ten hoogste strafschuldig'. Kindermoord voor de rechter in Leiden, 1546-1791. *Jaarboek der Sociale En Economische Geschiedenis van Leiden En Omstreken*, 16, 21–43.
- Pollak, O. (1950). *The criminality of women*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Quinn, C. (2002). Images and impulses: Representations of puerperal insanity and infanticide in late Victorian England. In M. Jackson (Ed.), *Infanticide. Historical perspectives on child murder and concealment, 1550-2000* (pp. 193–215). Ashgate.
- Ruberg, W. (2013). Travelling knowledge and forensic medicine: Infanticide, body and mind in the Netherlands, 1811-1911. *Medical History*, 57(3), 359–376. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mdh.2013.18>

- Ruberg, W. (2021). Infanticide and the influence of psychoanalysis on Dutch forensic psychiatry in the mid-twentieth century. *History of Psychiatry*, 32(2), 227–239. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957154X21989174>
- Scott, J. W. (1986). Gender: A useful category of historical analysis. *The American Historical Review*, 91(5), 1053–1075. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1864376>
- Shepherd, J. (2013). ‘One of the best fathers until he went out of his mind’: Paternal child-murder, 1864–1900. *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 18(1), 17–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2012.751045>.
- Streng, T. (1997). *Geschapen om te scheppen? Opvattingen over vrouwen en schrijverschap in Nederland, 1815-1860*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Tavecchio, L. W. C., & van Dijken, K. S. (1998). Vaders en de opvoeding en ontwikkeling van kinderen. *Kind En Adolescent*, 19(1), 68–77.
- Van de Loo, V. (2005). *De vrouw beslist. De tweede feministische golf in Nederland*. Inmerc.
- Van der Heijden, M. (2014). *Misdadige vrouwen. Criminaliteit en rechtspraak in Holland 1600-1800*. Bert Bakker.
- Van der Heijden, M., & Pluskota, M. (2015). Leniency versus Toughening? The Prosecution of Male and Female Violence in 19th-century Holland. *Journal of Social History*, 49(1), 149–167. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shv040>
- Van der Heijden, M., & Pluskota, M. (2018). Introduction to crime and gender in history. *Journal of Social History*, 51(4), 661–671. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shx144>
- Van der Heijden, M., & Schmidt, A. (2018). Theorizing crime and gender in a long-term perspective. In E. M. Dermineur, Å. Karlsson Sjögren, & V. Langum (Eds.), *Revisiting gender in European history, 1400–1800* (pp. 52–77). Routledge.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1998). Opinions and ideologies in the press. In A. Bell & P. Garrett (Eds.), *Approaches to media discourse* (pp. 21–63). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Van Nierop, L. (1959). De keuren tegen ‘het ombrengen van jong-gebore kinderen’ in de 17<sup>de</sup> en de 18<sup>de</sup> eeuw. *Amstelodamum*, 40(6), 154–155.
- Verheugt, A. J. (2007). *Moordouders. Kinderdoding in Nederland. Een klinisch en forensisch psychologische studie naar de persoon van de kinderdoder*. Koninklijke Van Gorcum B.V.
- Weimann, G., & Fishman, G. (1988). Attribution of responsibility: Sex-based bias in press reports on crime. *European Journal of Communication*, 3(4), 415–430. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323188003004004>
- Wilczynski, A. (1997a). *Child homicide*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wilczynski, A. (1997b). Mad or Bad? Child-killers, gender and the courts. *British Journal of Criminology*, 37(3), 419–436. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23637950>.
- Wilkinson, C. (2020). *Drama in the dailies. Violence and gender in Dutch newspapers, 1880 to 1930* [PhD thesis]. Leiden University.
- Wilson, C. B. A. (2012). *Mad, sad, or bad?: Newspaper and judicial representations of men who killed children in Victorian England, 1860-1900* [PhD thesis]. University of Essex.
- Zedner, L. (1991). *Women, crime, and custody in Victorian England*. Clarendon Press.

## Appendix 1

### Explanatory note on source selection

This qualitative research is based on articles selected from several Dutch newspapers and is aimed at reporting on cases of child murder in ten national and two regional newspapers. It includes trial reporting, in-depth articles and brief reports on verdicts. These newspapers have different ideological backgrounds and a varying audience: high quality newspapers were studied, such as *de Volkskrant*, *Trouw* en *Algemeen Handelsblad* (after 1970: *NCR Handelsblad*), but also more popular dailies like *Algemeen Dagblad* and *De Telegraaf*. Some editorial boards were mainly socialist – such as *Het Vrije Volk*, *Het Parool* and the communist *De Waarheid* – the newspaper *De Tijd* was Catholic. The two regional newspapers are *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* and *Limburgsch Dagblad*. These newspapers have been selected to be able to present a broad image of child murder in the Netherlands in the period 1960–1989. While some studied newspapers originate from certain religious and socio-political groups, we can conclude that ideological backgrounds and beliefs were in the vast majority of the articles of no importance on the views described: merely one article mentions that a mother regularly attended church. Other than that, we detected no influence of religious or social beliefs.

By means of different combinations of keywords we searched in the digital database

Delpher for articles devoted to child murder by parents, including cases of infanticide, neonaticide and filicide. We took into account variations in the name or description of the crime, using the following search terms in Dutch: 'infanticide', 'babymoord', 'kindermoord', 'kinderdoodslag', 'moeder doodt kind', 'vader doodt kind', 'moeder veroordeeld', 'vader veroordeeld', 'moeder doodslag kind', 'vader doodslag kind', 'vader moord kind', 'moeder moord kind'. In addition to the information found in these articles we searched for further data on specific cases.

We studied a total of 296 newspaper articles, covering 71 cases of child murder that were on trial between 1960–1989; this corpus is a representative selection of over 400 articles. A large part of this number consists of multiple articles that announced a verdict in the same manner. The average number of articles published per case varies between five or six articles, with some high-profile cases generating more attention in the press. For some cases we found more than ten articles. The studied corpus consists of in-depth articles, brief reports on verdicts and court reports, which make up 64% of the total number of articles.