

Tough girl or sidechick?

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These have the potential to influence a young viewing audience and their ideas about gender and violence. Her study is published in Springer's journal *Sex Roles*.

Film theorists believe that the action character Lt. Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver in the movie *Alien* in 1979, paved the way for a new type of female representation in American popular culture. It is now common to see female action characters take part in hand-to-hand combat, wield swords, shoot machine guns, and use high-tech weaponry to destroy both people and property - behaviors once exclusive to male action heroes.

Through the analysis of female characters in American action films, Katy Gilpatric's study explores the portrayal of female heroines to see if it is really transcending traditional [gender](#) roles, or rather, re-articulating and representing gender stereotypes in a new guise. She looked at the most popular, highest grossing action films (a total of 112) released between 1991 and 2005 featuring violent female action characters with a focus on gender stereotypes, demographics and quantity and type of violence.

Over 58% of violent female characters were portrayed in a submissive role to the male hero in the film, and 42% were romantically involved with him. The average violent female character was young, white, highly educated and unmarried. These women engaged in masculine types of violence (fought against males and strangers most of the time, often used weapons and caused high levels of destruction), yet retained feminine

stereotypes due to their submissive role and romantic involvement with the dominant male hero character.

Katy Gilpatric concludes: "The debate continues as to whether the few action heroines that we are familiar with, such as Sarah Connor and Lara Croft, have broken down gender barriers in action films. This research provides evidence that the majority of female action characters shown in American cinema are not images of empowerment; they do not draw upon their femininity as a source of power, and they are not a kind of 'post-gender woman' operating outside the boundaries of traditional gender restrictions. Instead, "they operate inside highly socially constructed gender norms, rely on the strength and guidance of a dominant male action character, and end up re-articulating [gender stereotypes](#)."

More information: Gilpatric K (2010). Violent female action characters in contemporary American cinema. Sex Roles, [DOI:10.1007/s11199-010-9757-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-010-9757-7)

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