

Final girl, the 'ideal victim', and Goldilocks: Challenging the exceptional criteria for victim status and survival in a gender hierarchy

BURROWS, Jacky <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9899-6878>>

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Final girl, the 'ideal victim', and Goldilocks: Challenging the exceptional criteria for victim status and survival in a gender hierarchy

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cmcJacky Burrows¹ 

Abstract

This paper explores the social construction of victims by triangulating literature on gender hegemony, the Final Girl horror film trope, and the real-world 'ideal victim' construct. It may thus be of value to those interested in film analysis, responses to victims of crime, and challenging social norms. It is argued that social and criminal justice understandings of who is worthy of victim status and survival draw on invisible criteria relating to idealised understandings of victims that are themselves underpinned by idealised understandings of gender. Only a tiny number of exceptional cases can meet such idealised criteria resulting in poor responses to victims. Attempts to improve victims' experiences must therefore be negotiated relative to those gendered victim 'ideals' and change can only be attritional. Final Girl may be understood as an attritional tool that can help erode idealised understandings of gender and victimisation, but that continues to be contained by them. A new phase of attrition involving a conscious, collaborative, degendered valorisation of strength and empathy is suggested.

Keywords

final girl, 'ideal victim', gender hegemony, challenging social norms, attritional change

Introduction

Clover's (1987, 1992) Final Girl, a victim-survivor trope in slasher films, and Christie's (1986) 'ideal victim' construct, which describes the people to whom society is willing to afford full victim status in the real world, have multiple commonalities. Both debuted in the late 1980s, gaining popularity alongside third-wave feminism (Christie, 1986; Clover, 1987, 1992), both are regarded as seminal works with contemporary relevance (Duggan, 2018a; Lewis et al., 2021; Paskiewicz and Rusnak,

¹Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Corresponding author:

Jacky Burrows, Institute of Law and Social Sciences, Sheffield Hallam University, Redmires, 4 University Green, Sheffield S1 2AA, UK.

Email: Jacky.burrows@shu.ac.uk

2020), and both are highly gendered and share several other themes. This connexion has however received limited attention. A Google Scholar search for “‘Final Girl’ AND ‘Ideal Victim’” in June 2025 yielded 19 hits, including some duplication and use of the words ‘ideal victim’ incidentally, without referring to Christie’s construct. Appropriately for their chosen foci, the remaining papers linked the concepts as part of a wider set of arguments with substantial scope for development (e.g. Cohen, 2014; Crofts and van Rijswijk, 2024; Welsh, 2010). This paper seeks to enhance understanding of both constructs through explicitly considering how the original constructs intersect and have evolved, with particular reference to the cultural hegemony underpinning them and how things may be progressed, in a largely Anglo-American literature.

Slasher films, the real world, and cultural hegemony: Representations matter

Although the relationship between any cultural medium, cultural norms, and individual beliefs is complex, film may be understood both as a representation of society and a cultural socialisation agent (Mikos, 2014; Orbe, 2013). Viewers may consequently absorb and appropriate content, take this into everyday discourse and praxis, and use it to help structure their identity and understand their social reality (Mikos, 2014; Orbe, 2013). The social construction of real-world victimisation is generally feminised (Reynolds et al., 2020). For gender-based violence in particular, victim-blaming is common and understood as gendered, and women may be rendered ‘pre-victims’ (having expectations of being harmed that impact daily life; Burke, 2020). The media is argued to both reproduce gender hegemony and influence societal reactions to victims (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Corteen, 2018; Schippers, 2007; Twemlow et al., 2022).

By definition, slasher films have victimisation narratives and thus may help shape people’s understandings of victimisation through their representations of specific people or groups. This may be incidental, or through filmmakers’ deliberate attempts at agenda-setting, challenging norms, and subverting power hierarchies (Orbe, 2013; Paskiewicz and Rusnak, 2020). For example, the horror genre is much maligned for high levels of sexual violence, reproducing misogynistic fantasies, and punishing female sexuality, with some evidence that such representation is linked to sexism, tolerance for abuse, and negative victim evaluations (Almwaka, 2021; Paskiewicz, 2020; Pinedo, 2020; Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Wellman et al., 2021; Welsh, 2010). However, it has also sometimes directly embraced social issues (Paskiewicz and Rusnak, 2020). The film *Get Out* is sometimes argued to be a good example of this (Wilz, 2021). *Final Girl* herself is argued to be an evolving construct, both reflecting and influencing changes in wider cultural anxieties and social discourses around gender, sexuality, and race (Clúa, 2020; Paskiewicz and Rusnak, 2020; Rusnak, 2020). Although *Clover* was criticised for a limited sample and generalisability issues, the *Final Girl* construct subsequently mainstreamed regardless, becoming firmly embedded in popular culture as a widely recognised, widely appropriated critical reference point (Clúa, 2020; Madden, 2020; Na, 2022; Paskiewicz and Rusnak, 2020; Pinedo, 2020). Slasher films are therefore spectacles of gender and victimisation, with *Final Girl* key to understanding who is regarded as disposable or worthy of survival.

Strongly rooted in Connell’s (1995) work on hegemonic masculinities, contemporary gender hegemony theory offers a valuable means of considering the nexus between *Final Girl* and

real-world victimisation. This emphasises dominant cultural ideals of gender in which men are the 'norm' and women are contradistinctively constructed as 'other', and where the resultant practices of masculinities and femininities invisibly legitimate and reproduce male dominance at all levels (Budgeon, 2014; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Rieser, 2001; Schippers, 2007). This is not an argument for cultural determinism, rather people are aware of gender norms and that they judged against idealised understandings of gender and therefore must negotiate their compliance with them (Budgeon, 2014; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Schippers, 1997). The idealised *relationship* between masculinities and femininities, constructed as both oppositional and complementary, is particularly emphasised and enforced through social sanction (Budgeon, 2014; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Schippers, 2007). For example, agency, competence, authority, and strength are celebrated masculine practices that are constructed as undesirable in women, perhaps through re-gendering labels that render them lower status, whereas femininity emphasises warmth, connectivity, compliance, and empathy, which are similarly stigmatised in men, thus containing threats to hegemonic masculinity (Budgeon, 2014; Schippers, 2007). Essentially, there is an assumption that men and women are different and should play different roles in society and gender hegemony is constructed heteronormatively (Becker, 1999; Schippers, 2007). Schippers (2007) uses the term 'pariah femininities' to describe the enactment of hegemonic masculinity by women, reflecting how threats to gender hegemony are managed in society. Gender hegemony is argued to harm everyone, while also being generally understood to benefit all men to some extent (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). It is further argued to help create abuse-supportive cultures (Gavey, 2019; Lazard, 2020).

Schippers (2007) suggests that social sanction for gender deviance may not occur where something more 'appropriate' is dominant, for example a male, gay athlete may not be stigmatised for being gay where their 'masculine' athleticism is dominant. Budgeon's (2014) work on emerging femininities – characterised by increased empowerment while still 'reassuringly feminine' and perhaps most visible in 'girl power' and third-wave feminism – similarly seems to reflect a delicate (conscious or unconscious) balancing act when resisting idealised understandings of gender. New femininities emerge to oppositional forces, so women must reproduce some gender complementarity to be less threatening to male hegemony. This argument suggests that change can only ever be attritional and will remain anchored to, and so always limited by, idealised understandings of gender. Women's empowerment became constructed as individualised, neoliberal, and stripped of any feminist label, meaning that women needed to negotiate being personally responsabilised for their success while also contained by an obscured gender hierarchy and risking sanction for being either too feminine or not feminine enough (Budgeon, 2014). This understanding of female empowerment yields little relational or institutional challenge and may be understood as supportive of hierarchies, especially where individual women who struggle to thrive are constructed as undeserving 'bad subjects' (Dabrowski, 2021). It may be thus understood as a self-serving patriarchal lie (Becker, 1999), with women as 'ignorant victims' (Christie, 1986), and structural inequality hidden and experienced as personal failure.

Valued masculinities and femininities need not be static nor hierarchical (Budgeon, 2014; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Schippers, 2007). Rather than focussing on individual empowerment, resistance needs to challenge gendered power relations and counter oppositional forces, such as social sanction and wider efforts to exclude, discredit and divide women, such as negatively reframing feminism (Budgeon, 2014; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Schippers, 2007).

Slasher films may potentially reproduce or, passively or actively, resist cultural hegemony through making power relations visible, depicting alternative valued practices, and legitimising relevant discourse, particularly where hierarchies are justified through 'commonsense' essentialism (Budgeon, 2014; Wilz, 2021). Final Girl sits at the crux of this.

Who is Final Girl?

Slasher films have demonstrable longevity and profitability, and are generally understood as a formulaic, 'low' form of horror, with common tropes that have been exploited and evolved (Clover, 1987, 1992; Welsh, 2010). The classic slasher involves a 'psychokiller' engaging in a graphic killing spree of generally young, female victims, until stopped by a single, female survivor that Clover named Final Girl (Clover, 1992; Welsh, 2010). Jamie Lee Curtis' Laurie Strode in the Halloween franchise is considered paradigmatic (Christensen, 2011). To emphasise vulnerability, slasher locations are typically places that are not associated with violence, for example summer camps or suburbia; however, this is also considered significant in terms of ethnicity and class as these are also typically white, middleclass locations (Rusnak, 2020). Audiences have learned to identify Final Girl early on, often using cues such as her being slightly removed from others, perhaps more studious or interested in 'boyish' activities, and in particular, being sexually unavailable and more developed as a character (Clover, 1992; Clúa, 2020; Wellman et al., 2021). To survive, Final Girl must first be seen as 'object terror personified' (Clover, 1992: 35), through her screams and cowering, then prove more aware and resourceful than her peers.

Final Girl analyses are highly gendered. It is generally accepted that her terror and elevated morality are coded feminine, and her survival practices masculine, though the relationship between her body and practices, and her potential status as a progressive, feminist icon are more debated (Brunet, 2020; Pinedo, 2020; Rieser, 2001). For example, although sometimes described as boyish in appearance, Final Girl is arguably still feminine in both form and non-survival practices (Lukancic, 2023; Rieser, 2001). Her survival practices are therefore sometimes understood as performances of female masculinity, sometimes as de-feminisation (rather than 'masculinisation' *per se*), and sometimes themselves monstrous (Brunet, 2020; Evans, 2018; Marra, 2020; Rieser, 2001; Santaulària I Capdevilia, 2020). For some, Final Girl is a feminist icon that resists misogyny and is rewarded for counter-normativity when more idealised gendered bodies are killed, though Clover herself disputed this (Hoyt, 2017; Marra, 2020, cited in Paskiewicz and Rusnak, 2020; Paszkiewicz, 2020; Rusnak, 2020). There is also continued and varied discussion about the gender composition of slasher spectatorship and how spectators may identify with and be impacted by Final Girl presentations, for example, issues with cross-gender identification (Brunet, 2020; Clover, 1992; Martín, 2020; Rieser, 2001; Welsh, 2010; Willoughby, 2020; Wilz, 2021). Better distinguishing between 'high' and 'low' horror and considering how Final Girl has evolved over time are likely significant for understanding some differences of opinion.

Final Girl could be understood as performing 'pariah femininity'; however, Schippers (2007) argument that deviation from gender ideals is more acceptable when something more 'appropriate' is dominant is perhaps more useful. Clover (1992) argued that Final Girl's pragmatism must be both coded masculine and *limited* to be acceptable, as it would allow men to retain 'ownership' of the trait. Final Girl's complementary feminine terror dominates narratives meaning her 'masculinity' may be best understood as a more reluctant, forced last resort in exceptional

circumstances rather than agentic empowerment (Brunet, 2020; Rieser, 2001). Like Budgeon's newly 'empowered' real-world women, Final Girl's survival requires a delicate balance of masculinity and femininity to ensure she remains tolerable, which also ensures she remains contained.

Equating Final Girl's survival with success and empowerment is also problematic. She is highly traumatised and barely survives, and understanding survival as 'reward' for sexual unavailability reproduces misogynistic constructions of heterosex (Rieser, 2001). More recent films in the Halloween franchise in particular focus on Laurie's trauma becoming both deeper and intergenerational (Brunet, 2020; Crofts and van Rijswijk, 2024). The 'girl' element of Final Girl is often ignored and arguably infantilising, patriarchal, and subordinating in itself, perhaps accepted as a third wave 'girl power' or underdog narrative. Clover (1992) however saw Final Girl as becoming adult in her survival, and Rieser (2001) argues that she is constructed as a potential heterosexual partner, with her sexual abstinence understood as pre-sexual, and survival the reward for waiting for a future partner. Thus, Final Girl's survival may be understood as rendering her ready for the 'heterosexual contract as a woman' that supports gender hegemony (Rieser, 2001: 388), or else othered from heteronormativity entirely. Final Girl's lone survivor status also makes her exceptional, and in being isolated, constantly forced into reactivity, and barely surviving an attack from an individual, sometimes only long enough for a male saviour to arrive, she poses no structural threat (Brunet, 2020; Rieser, 2001).

Original Final Girl is therefore a delicately balanced construct, contained by the idealised norms of gender hegemony to the point where her very survival depends on conforming to them, and should most accurately be understood as 'a patriarchal reconception of a liberal feminist ideal' (Brunet, 2020; Rieser, 2001: 379). Arguments that frame Final Girl as feminist therefore themselves reproduce and obscure gender hegemony. It is particularly troublesome to note that even academic challenges to gender hegemony replicate associations between strength, power and agency and masculinity, and weakness and victimhood with femininity (Brunet, 2020; Rieser, 2001). Such deference to idealised understandings of gender anchors us to its problematic nature, reproducing gender hegemony, and offering little scope to move beyond them. Asking 'society' to make a collective leap in shifting its norms however is simply not realistic, so, again, attritional change, negotiated with reference to idealised forms of masculinity and femininity, appears the only viable option.

The 'ideal victim' and her relationship with Final Girl

While the Final Girl trope represents who is deemed 'deserving' of survival in a slasher film, Christie's (1986) 'ideal victim' construct describes who society recognises as fully and legitimately deserving of victim status and justice in the real world. The benefits of victim status include emotional and financial support (Meyer, 2016). Readily comparable with Final Girl, Christie's 'ideal victim' is female, weak, and doing something 'respectable' in an unblameworthy location. Indeed, it may be argued that Final Girl must first demonstrate 'ideal victim' status through her 'moral' behaviour and feminine fear before she is allowed to fight back and survive. Significantly, victimhood and the 'ideal victim' are not just feminised, they draw on *idealised* femininity (Cohen, 2018). This may then be used as a reference point for sanctioning deviation from patriarchal gender norms, for example gendered victim-blaming based on women's sexual behaviour in the real-world or constructing sexually active women as disposable in slasher films. Being especially

young or old can also be useful for constructing the innocent vulnerability needed for 'ideal victimhood' (Christie, 1986; Forringer-Beal, 2022). Paradigmatic examples include a little old lady who, while going home in the daytime having helped an ill relative, is hurt and robbed by a large man who uses his profits for drugs, or a young virgin on her way home from caring responsibilities who is seriously hurt before she 'gives in' to rape (Christie, 1986; Lewis et al., 2021). Final Girl and the 'ideal victim' may both be considered illustrative of women as 'pre-victims' given they both have to live their lives according to the gendered rules of victimisation in order to survive or claim victim status once victimised.

Christie did not offer empirical support for the 'ideal victim' though there is subsequent evidence for its real-world application, for example, that it is apparent in media and governmental reporting and that it has been demonstrated that alignment with the construct influences responses to victims (see: Duggan, 2018a; Inzunza, 2022; Lewis et al., 2021; Welsh, 2010). Gender and victimisation are often reduced to oppositional (ideal / non-ideal) binaries in discussion, with the media both reproducing and contributing to this (Corteen, 2018; Donovan and Barnes, 2018; Long, 2021; Rusnak, 2020; Welsh, 2010). This can exaggerate difference and make binaries appear absolute and has been perpetuated in zero-sum contests between victims and offenders in political discourse (Gracia, 2018). The least 'ideal' victims do garner some empathy but are seen to deserve the least (Godzisz and Mazurczak, 2023), and so victim hierarchies are sustained, in part supported by the same idealised gender reference points that support gender hierarchies.

Christie's 'ideal victim' must also negotiate complex power dynamics in how she relates to both the perpetrator and to wider society. Just as Final Girl has her psychokiller, the 'ideal victim' is interdependent with an inhuman, othered, masculine (and sometimes racialised) 'ideal offender' (Donovan and Barnes, 2018; Duggan, 2018a; Long, 2021; Scott, 2018). Indeed, both are sometimes described as 'monster' (Clover, 1992; Davies, 2018; Ring, 2018; Willoughby, 2020). Being victimised by a more 'ideal offender' may enhance someone's credibility as an 'ideal victim', and vice versa, though this may also work in reverse and a less 'ideal offender' may render a victim less 'ideal' (Ring, 2018). Non-ideal victims of non-ideal offenders, such as male victims of female-perpetrated sexual harm, may be understood in highly gendered terms as 'doubly anomolised, doubly invisibilised' (Cohen, 2018: 279). The relationships between masculinity and femininity, Final Girl and her killer, and 'ideal' real-world victims and perpetrators may all therefore be understood as oppositional, complementary, and interdependent. Additionally, just as Final Girl draws on just enough 'masculine' agency while also being appropriately feminine in order to barely survive, and thus pose no structural threat, a real-world victim must be personally powerful enough to claim her victim status but also continue to appear 'ideally' weak (drawing on constructions of idealised femininity), and not pose a threat to other interests (such as patriarchal structures; Christie, 1986; van Wijk, 2013). The 'ideal victim' must therefore accept subordination and thus remains very much contained, assisted by idealised societal understandings of gender.

Both Final Girl and 'ideal victim' criteria are exceptional and unachievable for most, and so unreflective of the much more diverse reality of victimisation (Bosma et al., 2018; Christie, 1986; Cohen, 2018; Duggan, 2018a; Fohring, 2018). As with 'disposable', 'non-ideal' victims in a slasher, we dehumanise, deny, blame, and sometimes invisibilise 'non-ideal' real-world victims, and do so particularly when idealised gender relationships are endorsed and for gender-based

violence (Cohen, 2018; Fohring, 2018; Gracia, 2018; Gravelin et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2021; Scott, 2018). Denial and victim-blaming may therefore be understood as extreme forms of gender-based social sanction. Just world theory has also been used to understand both *Final Girl* and 'ideal victim' experiences (Ménard et al., 2019; van Wijk, 2013). Essentially, it feels safer to believe that bad things only happen to bad people, so people seek out 'blameworthy' features of victims. Whether in slasher films or the real-world, deviation from idealised understandings of femininity and victimisation, for example women engaging in casual sex, assists in that purpose and helps construct victim-blaming narratives in which women deserve to be harmed. Academic, social, media, and government discourses impact which 'ideal' characteristics are prominent at any time (Cross, 2018; Heap, 2018; Ring, 2018). Victim status is therefore linked to characteristics of the victim, observer needs, and the social context, not just the harm itself. Failure to delicately balance gendered power expectations while claiming victim status constitutes a refusal to complement hegemonic masculinity and positions non-ideal women as a threat to be contained. Victim-blaming assists with that containment and helps to legitimise and perpetuate gender hegemony. As with *Final Girl*, the 'ideal victim' may thus be seen as 'rewarded' for reproducing misogynistic constructions of gender and heterosex.

The 'ideal victim's' warmth and competence are also considered both relevant and gendered (Bosma et al., 2018; Capezza and Arriaga, 2008; Fiske, 2012). Warmth is associated with communality and inferred from physical appearance and perceptions of cooperation; competence is associated with agency and is inferred from physical appearance and status as well as perceptions of masculinity (Fiske, 2012). The 'ideal victim' needs to be warm (or at least sympathetic) and of lower competence (at least relative to the perpetrator and any institutions she might threaten), which is associated with paternal prejudice (Bosma et al., 2018; Fiske, 2012). This is again delicate though – as Christie argued, the 'ideal victim' must be weak but also put 'reasonable energy' into protecting herself, as failed resistance suggests she was not 'complicit' in her victimisation and helps to establish blamelessness (Bosma et al., 2018). It may also be important to distinguish between how a victim acts at the time of the incident and then later in the criminal justice system, where they may have their 'idealness' tested (Bosma et al., 2018; Larcombe, 2002), and also to note that warmth is 'activated' first, and so is more salient and impactful than competency (Capezza and Arriaga, 2008). Even mildly aggressive (and so arguably more masculine) responses reduce perceptions of warmth and increase blameworthiness for female victims (Capezza and Arriaga, 2008).

Final Girl's warmth may be apparent when her caring responsibilities or morality are emphasised, and she may be considered 'warm' (or at least sympathetic) through her feminine fear. Being a little removed from her peers is consistent with being 'warm' if understood as her being primed for her heterosexual contract, as any apparent isolation through prioritising babysitting over parties or casual sex for example, constitutes cooperation with the idealised social construction of gender and heterosex. Although her competence is emphasised relative to more disposable victims, it is still only 'just enough', with her sympathetic feminine fear most salient. Both *Final Girl* and the 'ideal victim' may thus also be understood as performing a delicate balancing of (feminine) warmth and (masculine) competence to remain acceptably complementary to gender hegemony, avoid social sanction, and either survive or achieve victim status. To do so, they must also accept subordination.

The evolution of final girl and the 'ideal victim'

The social construction of victimisation in film and the real-world has arguably developed alongside wider cultural shifts. Fourth-wave feminism and the mainstreaming of social justice in social discourse and popular media have led to renewed focus on female agency and sexual empowerment, an increased visibility of minoritised people, and greater emphasis on intersectionality (Lazard, 2020; Lukancic, 2023; Marra, 2020; Paskiewicz and Rusnak, 2020; Rusnak, 2020). There has been some cultural backlash and concern that increased visibility of issues may create a post-feminist illusion of equality that is at odds with reality (Lazard, 2020; Paskiewicz and Rusnak, 2020). As will be considered next, understandings of the 'ideal victim' have arguably evolved only so far as to reveal a wider range of ways in which she is problematic, and while *Final Girl* has arguably evolved more progressively, she remains substantially contained. Reflective of *Final Girl*'s mainstreaming and the academic literature, discussion on *Final Girl* moves from the confines of the slasher film.

Challenging and diversifying the normativity of victimisation and survival

While still often white, middleclass, and heterosexual, *Final Girl* has evolved to be more explicitly feminist, diverse, and intersectional (Almwaka, 2021; Clúa, 2020; Madden, 2020; Paskiewicz and Rusnak, 2020; Pinedo, 2020; Rusnak, 2020; Sturgeon-Dodsworth, 2021; Wilz, 2021). This has involved problematising the trope itself, and as with wider feminist praxis, is apparent in the visual and discursive reclamation of women's strength and sexuality, reduced exceptionalism and isolation, and diversified survival (Brunet, 2020; Clúa, 2020; Paskiewicz and Rusnak, 2020; Rusnak, 2020). The *Scream* franchise in particular is celebrated for continually and self-referentially subverting established the 'survival rules' associated with *Final Girl*, for example having lead players working collaboratively and collectively surviving (Clúa, 2020). *Final Girl* has been queered, though not without criticism (Clúa, 2020; Marra, 2020; Willoughby, 2020), and although still a rarity, there are now examples of older *Final Women*, for example in the more recent *Halloween* films (Brunet, 2020). There are even examples of survivors that superficially appear to be classic, disposable slasher victims, but that are shown more sympathetically as also subject to misogynistic systems, for example in the *Scream Queen* television series (Marra, 2020). Black survivors are also more visible having been generally absent or portrayed as primitive monsters or victims to be quickly killed, with the horror genre generally considered complicit with white hegemony (Pinedo, 2020; Wilz, 2021). Racially diversifying *Final Girl* has also not been without issue though, for example, sometimes hypersexualising, pathologising, and dehumanising her, and with any associated 'masculinisation' constructed more negatively than when enacted by a white woman: threatening and aggressive rather than brave, agentic, and capable (Paskiewicz and Rusnak, 2020; Pinedo, 2020; Wilz, 2021). *Get Out* (2017) is an exception. Regarded as 'elevated' horror (Corcoran, 2020), it arguably inverts *Final Girl* in terms of both gender and race, to make visible experiences of oppression, trauma, and marginalisation, and invite empathy (Pinedo, 2020; Wilz, 2021). Unusually, collaboration between men is also valued here (Wilz, 2021), though it is notably in the context of surviving white brutality. Wilz (2021) suggests that *Get Out* is better seen as independent of or a rejection of *Final Girl*, though analysis still often relies on her as a reference point.

For some, this evolution renders *Final Girl* a diluted cliché with limited ongoing meaning, though she is generally seen as progressive (Almwaka, 2021; Rusnak, 2020). At an individual level, *Final Girl* may now be more widely identified with by people that elsewhere feel they are a threat to social norms (Marra, 2020), and her existence and survival are less contained by idealised constructions of heterosex and gender. Through being less easy to categorise she arguably becomes more powerful (Brunet, 2020), though issues with the practices female bodies are permitted to enact also remain, for example, moral constraints on behaviour and the need to establish her 'weakness' (Clúa, 2020; Pinedo, 2020; Sturgeon-Dodsworth, 2021; Wellman et al., 2021). It is perhaps these more salient 'warmer' practices that made negotiating her slight gains in power and diversity acceptable. At best, progress is attritional and remains contained.

Understandings of the 'ideal victim' have also diversified. Gendered issues remain, for example, victims of gender-based violence are still responsibilised and blamed with reference to idealised understandings of victimisation, gender, and heterosex, to the extent that some forms are argued to be effectively decriminalised (Bows, 2018; Centre for Women's Justice/End Violence Against Women/Imkaan/Rape Crisis England and Wales, 2020; Corteen, 2018; Duggan, 2018b; Ring, 2018). Other groups are also constructed negatively and may be seen as less 'ideal' on the basis of their identity, for example, LGBT people may be stigmatised as deviant (Godzisz and Mazurczak, 2023), people with disabilities may be seen as defective, inherently vulnerable, or valueless (Mason-Bish, 2018), and Muslim women may also be constructed as other or an explicit threat (Zempi, 2018). Hate crime may even be understood as something to be expected, thus detracting from perpetrators as moral agents (Donovan and Barnes, 2018; Mason-Bish, 2018). This may be compounded by the fact that hate crime is often committed by 'ordinary people', rather than more monstrous, extremist, 'ideal' offenders (Zempi, 2018). It has also been shown that the intersection of race and gender, and other markers of 'otherness' such as poverty, may render black, male victims the '(un)victim', even the 'ideal suspect', because they conform more closely to the 'ideal offender' construct than the 'ideal victim' (Long, 2021). The victim-offender overlap is often still overlooked but also represents deviation from the 'ideal victim' construct that may impede claims to victim status (Gohara, 2023).

There are additionally concerns that progressive action may inadvertently contribute to or displace issues, perhaps creating new hierarchies. For example, some feminist campaigning positions women as passive and disempowered, and some action implemented in the name of a specific victim (such as Clare's Law, the domestic abuse disclosure legislation in England and Wales) draws on cases with more idealised victims, thus helping to sustain victim hierarchies (Bosma et al., 2018; Duggan, 2018b; Eisenman et al., 2000; Forringer-Beal, 2022; Gracia, 2018). Hate crime legislation, implemented in England and Wales since *Final Girl* and the 'ideal victim' emerged, through offering some marginalised/non-ideal groups enhanced protection and greater legitimacy as victims, may have marginalised others and so created new hierarchies (Corteen, 2018; Donovan and Barnes, 2018). Men, homeless people, sex-workers, older people, alcoholics, drug users, and migrants remain largely invisible when victimised (Cohen, 2018; Corteen, 2018; Furusho, 2018; Mason-Bish, 2018). Public narratives have also increasingly shifted from 'victim' to 'survivor' (Dunn, 2005), a more positive framing that may inadvertently suggest a false group cohesion and result in feelings of failure or exclusion for those that do not feel like survivors (Bosma et al., 2018). Progress may again therefore be understood as attritional and limited, and

coming with more negative unintended consequences that continue to create social and victim hierarchies.

Contemporary Final Girl, despite shifts in diversity at an individual level and increased collaboration, is still regarded as having no structural power and posing little threat to cultural hegemony (Brunet, 2020; Madden, 2020). Any collaboration is localised and focussed on survival, and collective trauma is still trauma, arguably now more extreme than ever, and still serving to contain (Brunet, 2020; Martín, 2020). In the Halloween franchise for example, Laurie Strode's trauma becomes foregrounded, now spanning decades and generations (Brunet, 2020). Social justice discourses may even be appropriated in portrayals of Final Girl to help justify the continued use of extreme violence against women, risking the ongoing normalisation of abuse while again masking cultural inequality with narratives of empowerment. Such high levels of trauma may serve to make any increased personal freedoms socially tolerable, but false-empowerment narratives arguably constitute gaslighting, as Final Girl remains very much contained. More overt misogyny still present in the horror genre further contains her (Rieser, 2001).

In the real-world, being a non-ideal victim is associated with under-reporting, but if entering the criminal justice system, secondary victimisation is a substantial risk, for example through victim-blaming and issues with prosecution, conviction, and accessing support (Corteen, 2018; Gohara, 2023; Meyer, 2016; Zempi, 2018). Individual victims are therefore sanctioned and contained at an institutional level. However, society also often fails to recognise communities as 'proper' victims and individualist-retributive models of justice particularly fail to address collective harm (Davies, 2018; Gohara, 2023). The societal focus on individuals and the use of idealised reference points in assessing individual merit is thus again argued to be supportive of social inequality, here, masking harm to communities. Even if individual Final Girls or 'ideal victims' are successful in surviving or gaining individual justice, this is far short of social justice (Furusho, 2018).

Victim-survivor-hero-thriver – Thinking about a post-victimisation future

Considering pathways to a positive future for Final Girl, and both 'ideal' and 'unideal' victims is also important. Final Girl overcoming her monster may bring a sense of closure (Wilz, 2021), but her 'triumph' is often little more than barely staying alive, and with many others dead. Contemporary Final Girl's future may involve her having to continue to live with monsters, perhaps in the form of the patriarchy, white hegemony, or trauma, and perhaps only doing so on the edge of mainstream society, barred from leadership, returned to her 'proper place', or with questions about whether power actually benefits women (Madden, 2020; Martín, 2020; Santaulària I Capdevila, 2020; Wilz, 2021). She has been referred to as 'victim', 'survivor', and 'hero', sometimes in combination, for example Clover seeing Final Girl as 'victim-hero', with the (feminine) victim element dominant (Clover, 1992; Cohen, 2018; Evans, 2018; Martín, 2020; Rieser, 2001; Ruthven, 2020; Wellman et al., 2021; Wilz, 2021). Analyses that are less concerned with hegemony tend to emphasise individual survival or heroism, whereas foregrounding hegemony or trauma leads to much bleaker perspectives (Paskiewicz and Rusnak, 2020). Indeed, in a 2015 preface to Clover (1992, 2015), Clover notes that 'tortured survivor' might be a preferable term to 'hero'. Even if we accept a degree of empowerment or heroism, as Duggan (2018a) notes when discussing the 'ideal victim', if power only comes with trauma, it is at best a pyrrhic victory.

Such dire future projections for Final Girl appear reflective of reality. The victimology literature may use 'victim' and 'survivor' interchangeably, or increasingly, 'victim-survivor', ostensibly to respect a diversity of responses and preferences; however, being a 'survivor' is arguably at odds with what is needed to claim victim status. Dunn (2005) for example sees victims and survivors as idealised constructs at opposite ends of an agency continuum. Meyer (2016) argues that victims need to both go through a redemption journey similar to desistance from offending, in that they must demonstrate they're worthy of empathy, and also deal with their trauma. This requires both competence/agency and warmth/communality, though as noted, higher levels of competence and agency potentially reduce claims to victim status and support from others (Bosma et al., 2018; Cross, 2018). Criminal cases are often slow and come with risks of blame or secondary victimisation (Donovan and Barnes, 2018; Zempi, 2018). In the justice system, working towards recovery may therefore be challenging for some time, and where possible, may come with the unintended consequence of loss of sympathy due to reduced 'idealness' as a victim.

A victim label tends to be associated with weakness, so accepting this may be useful for gaining support and moving to a more agentic position, but it is also associated with stigma and may threaten self-perception, so rejecting a victim label and/or avoiding justice systems completely is what makes recovery and survival possible for some (Donovan and Barnes, 2018; Fohring, 2018; Gracia, 2018; Ring, 2018). However, attempting to survive through rejecting a victim label also renders people 'unideal' and may leave them without support (Fohring, 2018). People may especially reject a victim label if already feeling subordinated or othered (Donovan and Barnes, 2018), thus magnifying existing injustices. Attaining *survivor* status in the real world may therefore also be impeded by idealised expectations about being a victim and wider social inequality.

Hero status is often constructed as exceptional and understood as awarded for what an individual has done for others, for example, good deeds, protection, being inspirational (Gray and Wegner, 2011; Ross, 2018; Tedeschi and McNally, 2011). Public perceptions of heroism tend to be based on the relevant act being rare and coming with substantial cost to the hero, that cost being understandable as a special form of cooperation (Kaft-Todd and Rand, 2019). Heroism appears to have both 'masculine' and 'feminine' components, being generally associated with high levels of both agency and communion (Hoyt et al., 2020). It is also associated with transformation (Ross, 2018). Indeed, a key feature of 'heroes', in contrast to 'victims', is the attempt at survival and making that survival meaningful (Khlevnyuk, 2023). With real-world victimisation, meaning-making and transformation may be best equated with the concepts of 'thrivers' and post-traumatic growth, in which a survivor of a traumatic event goes through a process of healing and meaning-making that results in positive change (Mangelsdorf and Eid, 2015).

The exceptional and costly nature of what Final Girl endures means she may be understood as a hero, but her agency and future are substantially contained by trauma. This is perhaps most apparent in with 'repeat Final Girls', for example in the Halloween and Scream franchises or serialised comic books (Brunet, 2020; Crofts and van Rijswijk, 2024; Ruthven, 2020). Crofts and van Rijswijk (2024) write positively that it is increasingly Final Girl that returns in franchises (rather than the killer). However, although both self-reliant and working more collectively, this renders her trapped in hypervigilance and repeat trauma. Positive meaning-making and thriving are still not real options for Final Girl, and any threat to cultural hegemony she might pose as 'hero' remains contained. Although the 'ideal victim' is herself exceptional, victims and their experiences more generally are not, so most victims will not be understood as be heroes. The socio-cultural context

and reactions of others are important for people's capacity to thrive (Tedeschi and McNally, 2011), but heroism deviates from the 'ideal victim' construct and may result in limited social support. Portrayals of someone as a victim rather than a hero, are, for example, associated with lower levels of blame (Bosma et al., 2018). At an individual level, attempting to survive or thrive may therefore be personally meaningful but also potentially isolating or otherwise harmful. Survival and thriving may be understood as threats to cultural hegemony, but ones that are easily contained through the continued use of socially constructed idealised expectations of gender and victims to challenge individual legitimacy and keep people subordinated. This itself is abusive and should be seen as societal failure.

Looking forwards – Elective de-gendering as the next attritional step

Both Final Girl and the 'ideal victim' must undertake an exceptional, delicately balanced, Goldilocks-like 'just right' performance of gender and victimisation negotiated in relation to idealised understandings of masculinity, femininity, and heterosex, to either survive or claim justice when victimised. This performance of gender does not, however, only apply to their behaviour at the time of the victimisation and their reactions afterwards, rather their behaviour and character as 'pre-victims' prior to the victimisation are especially significant. Most people cannot meet such exceptional expectations, and those expectations contain all women to some extent.

Final Girl may be considered an 'ideal victim' that is a 'survivor' in so much that she was not killed, but she remains unable to thrive. She is now more diverse, agentic, and empowered than the 'ideal victim', and has greater opportunity for collaboration, but while she is used as a reference point, survival will continue to be anchored to heteronormative, racialised, classist understandings of who is deserving. The futures of both Final Girl and the 'ideal victim' remain bleak, contained at both an individual and structural level. Improving victim experiences and challenging the construction of women as pre-victims, can therefore only be achieved through addressing wider inequality; however, such change will need to negotiate oppositional forces and will thus be attritional. Consistent with Clover's (1987) original conclusion, Final Girl may perhaps therefore be understood as an attritional tool, incrementally resisting idealised understandings of gender and victimisation, but remaining contained by them.

Knowledge is socially constructed and serves specific powers (Cohen, 2018, citing Foucault). As seen with Final Girl and the 'ideal victim', while current approaches to victimisation and social inequality may accurately capture contemporary issues, they arguably also reproduce hierarchies through their continued use of men/masculinity as reference points. People with subordinated identities constitute the majority but continue to be anchored by the 'norm' of the most 'ideally masculine', straight, white men, with the academy arguably complicit with the very concerns it is challenging (Cohen, 2018). The framing of future change is therefore likely key. De-gendering is sometimes posited as a solution, particularly as it allows for the scrutiny and reconstruction of male practices without the 'contagion' of femininity (Budgeon, 2014; Rieser, 2001). However, degendering would also likely be met with substantial resistance and obscure continued social inequalities (Budgeon, 2014; Schippers, 1997). For example, newer masculinities (see Bonner-Thompson and Nayak, 2022; Connor et al., 2021), more focussed on collaboration and

compassion, are emerging; however, these arguably remain localised, wrapped in acceptably 'masculine' packages to aid their own negotiation of oppositional forces, and with the risk of compassion being enacted in patriarchal ways, especially in a wider society in which subordination and victimisation are feminised.

Articulating issues as social justice problems with selectively degendered solutions benefitting all may be a meaningful, attritional next step. Indeed, reframing issues so that they are *more* gendered and intersectional (Christensen and Jensen, 2019), may increase the visibility of more complex hierarchies with the same mechanisms subordinating women also subordinating many men. This would still use masculinity as a reference point but would not mask hierarchies in the way that degendering might and may be better received by men who feel stigmatised, anxious, unprivileged, and lacking choice as to how to enact masculinity, perhaps redirecting some scrutiny to aspects of masculinity itself, rather than, for example, men being encouraged to blame women or minority ethnic groups for feelings of powerlessness.

Strength and agency remain 'masculine', and thus contained in women, and warmth (understood as empathy, collaboration, and sometimes morality) remains a feminine ideal, and thus contained in men. Indeed, empathy and compassion have arguably been stigmatised among men precisely *because* maintaining hegemony requires the dehumanisation of others (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The persistence of neoliberal individualist ideals arguably helps to preserve these constructions of gender and gendered hierarchies. Degendering collaboration so that it is constructed as a societal rather than a gendered value may therefore have benefits. Degendering strength and empathy alongside this, so that they are reframed as human rather than gendered values, may also be meaningful for constructing new, more equitable norms, without threatening other gendered ways of being. True empathy may have specific value, relative to compassion, for avoiding *patriarchal* compassion. Therefore, a conscious, collaborative valorisation of degendered, empathic strength may make sense as the next attritional step: a little more everyday heroism to help kill a few more social injustice monsters. This could improve victims' experiences, reduce victimisation itself, and help address hierarchical expectations that men should dominate and women live as pre-victims – an incremental push towards moving past exhausting fights for survival, and perhaps being able to thrive a little more.

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ORCID iD

Jacky Burrows  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9899-6878>

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Author biography

Jacky Burrows gained more than a decade of experience working in the English criminal justice system before starting as a Criminology lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University (UK) in 2014.