

Why is it NEVER a woman's fault?

By CAROL SARLER

When the prison doors clanged shut behind her, Hayley Kenny began her four-year sentence this month with plenty to think about.

She could think, for instance, about the long weeks during which her violent boyfriend, Craig Pearce, had abused her twoyearold son Kieran - while she stood back and did nothing.

She could think about the day she came home from work to find that Pearce, now serving 18 years, had punched the child so brutally in the abdomen that it was evident to a plank of wood he was dying - but she stood back and did nothing.

She could think, too, of the judge's words: that if she had only lifted a telephone to call an ambulance, Kieran might have been alive today.

For her dereliction of the most basic motherly instinct, 23-year-old Hayley is now the first woman ever to be convicted of the new charge of familial homicide, or allowing the death of a child.

And hurrah for that: frankly, if it were left to me, I'd throw away the key.

For years, scarcely has a month gone by without some hideous story coming to light about a child being physically assaulted, sexually abused and even murdered by his father or, more usually, his stepfather (aka 'Mummy's new partner').

Yet instead of asking, as we sensibly should, where Mummy was while all this was going on, the popular judicial line has been that obviously she was so cowed by the bad guy - and make no mistake, he is a bad guy - that she couldn't possibly have been expected to do anything about it.

No, not even intervene to save her own child's life.

The question now is this: do we celebrate Kenny's punishment as a turn for the better and the start of a new trend? Or do we expect her case to be an isolated blip without any suggestion that we hold our breath for the next one? I hope it's the former.

But the way things are, I fear it might just be the latter.

It is a pernicious corruption of the once progressive principles of feminism that today women are responsible for nothing and therefore guilty of nothing.

Blame it all on the boys, no matter what the wickedness. 'The girl can't help it,' has become the anthem of our times.

Within hours of Hayley Kenny's well-deserved incarceration, Woman's Hour's hot topic of the day was a new report claiming that one in five men suffers from domestic violence.

To illustrate the point, some bullying thug of a woman came on to explain herself. But instead of dripping remorse, she managed the same self-pitying victim-whine that routinely stalks the programme: 'Nuffin' to be proud of, fair enough,' but she 'couldn't express 'erself' and what she really needed was 'elp'.

If *she* needed help, what about her wretched punchbags? At which point a male guest, himself a sufferer at the hands of such a thug, congratulated her, expressed his admiration for her seeking the 'elp', while the interviewer

didn't so much as hint a criticism of the woman's ferocious rages.

Can you imagine *any* programme, let alone Woman's Hour, affording the same soft ride to a man who had regularly beaten women? They wouldn't give him air-time, let alone applause; he'd be held to be entirely responsible for his brutishness with no excuses considered.

But when the he is a she, well, give her a break, the girl can't help it.

On this basis, some women quite literally get away with murder. The woman who lies in wait for a louse of a husband who has battered her for years, then stabs him through his heart, is hailed as a heroine by today's appalling apology for a women's movement.

Nobody is allowed to ask why she didn't try to escape: his behaviour had broken her spirit; her broken spirit, in turn, was her reasonable provocation.

Fine. And, yes, entirely possible under some circumstances. But, again, imagine a man, his body bruised from 20 years of bites and kicks and hurled implements, his mind numbed by 20 years of ridicule and humiliation and abuse, killing his wife.

He would never escape a murder charge with a claim of provocation. In fact, should he even try to claim 'I woz provoked', he would guarantee himself hordes of outraged sisters waving banners outside the courtroom - it was his fault, and his alone, that his dear wife was dead.

As it happens, I am uneasy about invoking provocation in cases of any and all killings.

But I am still less easy that we appear able to accept it for women and not for men, supporting as this does the view that men are able to take responsibility for what they do, whereas women are not; that women are less capable, less clever, less moral and less able to make decisions and live with the results.

Yet another example of this differentiation thrust itself into our faces this week on the knotty issue of gambling.

For centuries there have been people who cannot resist the instant riches that they just *know* are riding on the next horse, card or throw of dice, to which end they bet their food and even their homes, in the process driving their families to exasperation, desperation and the poor-house.

Our response to them, at least while most of them were men, has included anger, scorn, contempt and - from the exceedingly generous - a measure of pity.

But it's all changed now that newly released figures show that the fastestgrowing group of people hooked on this dangerous sport are women.

Indeed, the British Medical Association is suddenly demanding that their indulgence should be promoted to a proper illness (for which read: it's not their fault, the girls can't help it) and that the NHS should spend serious money, that is to say yours and mine, 'treating' them.

Actually, it is their fault. Addiction to gambling is a matter of choice, in that you don't catch it in one go. I played poker once, two years ago, in some so-called celebrity tournament and won it, to the tune of four figures for my favourite charity.

You cannot imagine the excitement. In fact, so acute was the heart-thumping that then and there I recognised it for the seduction it was and haven't looked at a playing card since.

But if I had, and consequently succumbed to destructive temptation, then according to the BMA you should now feel not cross but sorry for me - just as if I had blamelessly acquired, say, osteoporosis.

No doubt the BMA's decision to weigh in is supposed to look caring for women. But what I think it says is that women really are the weaker sex.

Progress? The message is clear: whisper support, offer encouragement, but never, ever, tell a woman she should just say no. No woman is supposed to buck up, square her shoulders, stand up for herself or - least of all - pull herself together.

A sexually ridiculous jibe from a male colleague at work, one which a generation ago we would have destroyed with derision? Not now.

Bring on the smelling salts, the industrial tribunal and the counsellors to diagnose 'post-traumatic stress disorder'.

Never mind that this makes the woman more publicly pathetic than the twit who offended in the first place - or that the inevitable conclusion must be: modern woman, sippy bint, falls to bits under pressure.

Send us out on a date with a chap and look what happens. You're drunk, he's matched you drink for drink so he's equally drunk. Oh yes, he is!

The grisly fantasy of the drug rapist has been utterly discredited; British bars are not replete with soberly calculating lounge lizards, slipping deadly powders into the nearest cocktail and then waiting for their moment of unconscious conquest (no matter how handy such an image has been to counter hungover morning regret).

The reality is far more likely to be silly pairs of inebriates who foolishly agree to sex - which at least one of them (and good money says both) often later wishes they had refused.

Yet once more the inequality is obvious. Although they both agreed to the sex at the time, the man's agreement is something he is expected to live with when sobered up, but if recent government initiatives are to win the day, the woman's agreement is not.

It is pleasing to hear reports this week that some judges are opposing radical moves to boost rape convictions.

The Council of Circuit Judges is said to be unhappy with plans to overhaul rape laws, calling them 'overcomplicated'.

I'll say. Especially those that ask courts to accept that a man's 'consent' stands, while the woman's 'consent' may be deemed to be invalid because it was given while she was as drunk as he was.

He is, therefore, sufficiently competent to be a rapist and she is sufficiently incompetent to be a victim; silly, stupid, little dolly her.

This might result, as is planned, in more men being flung in jail and therefore in a victory for women's groups who desire nothing more or less.

We know that many - or should that be most? - of these groups which set themselves up as anti-rape and antiviolence are led by militant feminists, whose real agenda is anti-men.

But if they really think that their anti-men propaganda is the same thing as pro-women politics, they are in cloud-cuckoo-land.

Everything they achieve, they do so at the cost of women; at the cost of acknowledging the strength of a woman's determination - and at the cost of allowing a woman the ultimate equality, without which all else will fail: an equal right to make mistakes.

Women make mistakes for all manner of reasons. Because they risked a bet, because they fell for the wrong man, because they took on a job too far - or a job too mindless.

Sometimes we crumple because of pressures others pile upon us; sometimes because we get it wrong and pile pressures upon ourselves.

The point is that they are our mistakes and, in any sane world, ours to answer for - not ours to wriggle out of with the pitiful old lament that the girl can't help it.

She *can* help it. And when her mistake, like that of Hayley Kenny, is so grotesque that she puts her boyfriend before the safety - and ultimately the life - of her child, there are and should be no excuses.

Bang her up, I say. Not just for her; not just for justice. Bang her up because none of us will ever get equality worth the word unless, when we go dreadfully wrong, we learn to take our punishment like a man.

