

Aileen Wuornos: Did America's First Female Serial Killer Act in Self-Defense?

Crystal Ponti interviews Phyllis Chesler on her new book, [True Crime Blog](#).



Some say [Aileen "Lee" Wuornos](#) lived a tortured life. After enduring a childhood riddled with violence and abuse, she later sold sex to survive. In 1989 and 1990, whether in self-defense or cold blood, she killed seven men in wooded areas off Highway I-75 in Florida. A jury found her guilty of murder [on January 27, 1992 and sentenced her to death](#). The first woman ever profiled by the FBI as a serial killer, Wuornos died by lethal injection on October 9, 2002.

[Phyllis Chesler](#), a feminist leader, psychotherapist and expert courtroom witness, had behind-the-scenes access to Wuornos and those involved in her life and case. Chesler had hoped to testify for the defense on the dangers and trauma of

prostitution and a woman's right to self-defense. As she writes in her book Requiem for a Female Serial Killer, "[Wuornos's] bullets shattered the silence about violence against prostituted women, about what happens to them when they refuse to take it anymore."

A&E Real Crime spoke with Chesler about her motivation to help Wuornos, whether she acted in self-defense and how viewing Wuornos's case through a feminist lens provides a provocative, yet overlooked, perspective.

How did you get involved in this case and what was your interest in helping Wuornos?

What got me involved in the case was the question: Does a prostitute have the right to defend her own life? And the answer is: Apparently not. Who would believe her? Would the police believe her? Wouldn't she simply be accused of murder and be sent away for a long time because she's already considered a criminal? My interest in her was a woman's right to defend her life—a woman [who had been battered](#) not just by one man, but by thousands, many thousands of men. I was interested in extending [battered woman syndrome](#) (a psychological condition that develops in domestic violence victims after long term abuse) to apply to prostitutes.

You assembled a team of expert witnesses to testify on behalf of Wuornos. Why were none of these witnesses called by the defense?

Lee had a good public defender by the name of [Trish Jenkins](#). I had to jump through hoops to get her to meet with me. Lee finally ordered her to sit down and talk. I laid out my vision, and also all kinds of help in the form of expert witnesses. Unfortunately, as I learned, Trish's experience was defending male rapists and male serial killers.

I also think Lee was the most difficult client Trish had ever had. Lee didn't know how to save herself. She clearly knew how to survive on the highway and on the road of life she had

traveled, but she couldn't understand, for example, why feminists would care about her or testify on her behalf. Trish should have called some of us to testify. If she had, the jury would have learned about previous cases where women were raped and argued self-defense and won. The jury never got to hear the phrase "self-defense," even though Lee used the term 16 times in her [video confession](#). One of the grounds of the appeal to the Florida Supreme Court was that the defense did not call any expert witnesses. But the court didn't care. They upheld the sentence.

Wuornos initially claimed that the murders were in self-defense, but later changed her story and told officials she had intentionally killed the men. Do you believe it's possible that Wuornos killed all these men in self-defense?

I believe she killed in self-defense that first time. [Richard Mallory] was a bad guy with [a long history of violence towards women](#). He [frequented prostitutes] and was a pornography addict. At the time of his murder, he was also high as a kite and could easily have threatened her. So, from her point of view, she struggled to save her life. She'd been advised to carry a gun by men she had befriended.

After that [incident], I believe she put into effect her own personal affirmative action program. If a guy wanted to do something to her that she didn't want to do, not even for money, or if a guy got rough with her, she killed him.

In your book, you write, 'In that courtroom, and in the media, she was seen as the lesbian prostitute criminal who hated men.' Did gender bias come into play during Wuornos's trial and sentencing? Did she get a fair trial?

She did not get a fair trial at all. The jury was not a jury of her peers. These were law-and-order Floridians, church-going types. There were no prostitutes on her jury. There were no feminist advocates on her jury. And, in Florida, [for a capital murder case] once you say [you oppose the death penalty, you're not on the jury](#). They dismiss you. To

complicate matters, the prosecutor [John Tanner]...had a really negative view of prostitutes. He wrote articles in which he said they were the [ones giving men AIDS](#) and bringing them down, when it's quite the opposite. So, he went for her blood, because she was not only a woman, she was a prostitute.

In the end, it came down to gender and prostitution, but the jury was never educated on what prostitution can do to a woman over a 20-year period or what it would mean if a John got dangerously violent with a prostitute. Is she expected to just lay down and die? What if she fights back? What do we do about her then? The jurors never got to understand any of these issues.

Do you believe if the jury had been educated on the trauma of prostitution and what Wuornos had endured, that the outcome would have been different?

Yes, I think they would have found her guilty and might not have recommended a death sentence. Also, they should only have been focused on the first murder. They should not have known about the subsequent six or seven [that Wuornos confessed to and was expected to be charged for], but [due to the pre-trial media spectacle], they did. How could they believe self-defense, if they knew she had gone on to do it again and again and again? It's possible that might have made all the difference. [Editor's note: Wuornos's defense requested a change in venue for this and other reasons, but the judge denied it.]

There might have been a smidgen of mercy in understanding the whole picture. Many male serial killers are given life sentences with no parole. It could have happened here too.

The media and social scientists have described Wuornos as the first 'female serial killer.' The FBI has also classified her as such. In your opinion, did Wuornos fit the description of a serial killer?

Lee was a unique serial killer. She wasn't like some male

serial killers, and she wasn't like other female serial killers. Many women are savagely abused in childhood, but they don't become serial killers. Many do run away from incestuous and dysfunctional homes, and into the arms of waiting pimps and a lifetime of prostitution, but they don't become serial killers either.

Male serial killers tend to be pretty strategic. They kill strangers, mostly women and [often prostitutes](#). [Female serial killers](#) usually kill intimates for money. Husband after husband or boyfriend after boyfriend. Lee doesn't fall into these typical profiles. [Lee killed adult male strangers](#). These were big guys, and some were cops. And it wasn't for money. When I got involved in her case, I didn't even think of her as a serial killer. It took me years to figure this out.

What lasting impact has this case had on your life?

When I got into this case, I thought I could save her and that justice at some level would prevail. But I learned that it's not so easy, and my optimism was misplaced. I also learned that you can't rescue every woman who's been so damaged—she's beyond earthly salvation. This was a hard lesson for me to learn.