

Gendered Violence and Masculinity

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Introduction

Violence is gendered not because every man is violent or every woman experiences violence in the same way, but because societies attach power, authority, vulnerability, protection, aggression, and care to gendered identities. These expectations influence who is permitted to use force, whose fear is taken seriously, how victims are judged, and which forms of harm are normalized. Masculinity is especially important to this analysis because it is not a single biological trait. It is a collection of social expectations about how men should behave, and those expectations differ across class, race, nationality, sexuality, age, and institutional setting. Some forms of masculinity value responsibility, courage, emotional honesty, and care for others. Harmful forms link manhood to dominance, entitlement, sexual conquest, toughness, weapon use, risk-taking, and the refusal to appear vulnerable. Violence becomes more likely when individuals and institutions reward those traits, excuse coercion as natural male behavior, or treat women and less powerful men as objects through which status can be proven. A careful analysis must therefore avoid two errors: reducing violence to male biology and pretending that gender has no role. Gender norms interact with childhood experience, alcohol and drug misuse, economic insecurity, access to weapons, political ideology, organizational culture, and weak accountability. This interaction helps explain why gendered violence occurs in intimate relationships, schools, workplaces, sport, armed conflict, online spaces, and political movements. (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005)

Masculinity, Power, and Interpersonal Violence

Interpersonal violence is often sustained by beliefs about authority and entitlement rather than by uncontrolled emotion alone. In intimate relationships, an abusive partner may use physical assault, sexual coercion, threats, financial restriction, surveillance, humiliation, isolation, or control over reproductive decisions. These actions are connected by the attempt to establish power. The World Health Organization identifies gender inequality, attitudes that justify violence, male controlling behavior, and unequal power within relationships as important drivers of violence against women. This does not mean that poverty, stress, jealousy, alcohol, or conflict automatically cause abuse. Many people experience those conditions without becoming violent, and describing violence as a spontaneous reaction can hide the pattern of decisions through which one person controls another. Harmful masculine norms can intensify that pattern when men are taught that respect must be enforced, rejection is humiliation, emotional dependence is weakness, or a partner's autonomy threatens male status. The same norms can discourage men who experience violence from reporting it because they fear appearing weak or being disbelieved. Gender analysis should therefore include

women and girls, who bear a disproportionate global burden of intimate-partner and sexual violence, while also recognizing violence against men, boys, transgender people, and people in same-sex relationships. Intersectionality is essential because disability, immigration status, economic dependence, race, sexuality, and social isolation can increase vulnerability and reduce access to protection. Prevention must move beyond telling potential victims to avoid danger. It should challenge entitlement, teach consent and relationship skills, support economic and legal autonomy, provide survivor-centered services, and hold perpetrators accountable. (World Health Organization, 2025; World Health Organization, n.d.)

Sport and peer culture provide a useful example of how institutions can either reinforce or interrupt harmful masculinity. Competitive sport does not cause sexual violence, and most athletes do not commit assault. However, environments that combine celebrity status, group loyalty, heavy drinking, hazing, objectification of women, and protection from consequences may create conditions in which misconduct is minimized. Team members may remain silent to preserve solidarity, while administrators may prioritize reputation or revenue. The relevant issue is not athletic ability but organizational culture. Prevention requires clear consent policies, independent reporting channels, bystander training, proportionate discipline, and leadership that refuses to treat aggression outside the game as proof of competitiveness. Similar dynamics exist in fraternities, military units, police organizations, workplaces, and online communities. Group membership can provide belonging and moral purpose, but it can also reward displays of dominance and punish empathy. A gender-transformative approach does not shame boys or declare masculinity inherently toxic. It invites men and boys to question which behaviors are being presented as necessary for acceptance and to develop forms of identity based on self-control, mutual respect, care, and courage without domination.

Militarism, Nationalism, and Political Conflict

Warfare is frequently narrated through gendered symbols. Nations are imagined as feminine homelands that must be protected, soldiers as masculine defenders, and political leaders as fathers whose strength is measured by their willingness to use force. Women may be celebrated as mothers of the nation, caregivers, symbols of cultural purity, or victims whose suffering justifies retaliation. These narratives obscure the fact that women serve as soldiers, medics, journalists, political leaders, organizers, and combatants, while men also experience displacement, sexual violence, forced recruitment, grief, and caregiving responsibility. They also make diplomatic restraint appear feminine or weak, which can narrow political choices. Leaders may perform toughness for domestic audiences, and critics of war may be accused of cowardice or disloyalty. The connection between masculinity and political violence is therefore institutional and symbolic as well as personal. Military organizations require discipline and readiness to use force, but they do not have to rely on contempt for women, emotional suppression, or humiliation of perceived weakness. Professional military ethics can emphasize civilian protection, lawful orders, unit responsibility, and controlled force. When organizations instead normalize domination and dehumanization, the risk of abuse increases. (Higate

& Hopton, 2005)

The war between Russia and Ukraine illustrates some of these dynamics, but it should not be explained as the psychological product of one man's masculinity. Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 emerged from geopolitical ambition, imperial narratives, authoritarian institutions, security claims, military planning, and denial of Ukrainian sovereignty. Gendered political performance nevertheless shaped public messaging. Vladimir Putin's carefully cultivated image of physical strength and decisive leadership belongs to a broader nationalist ideal in which compromise is treated as weakness and territorial control as proof of greatness. Russian state rhetoric has also promoted "traditional values" while restricting feminist and LGBTQ expression, presenting gender hierarchy as part of national identity. Ukraine's response has included both traditional images of male defenders and visible participation by women in military, medical, logistical, journalistic, and political roles. Conflict also increases the risks of trafficking, intimate-partner violence, sexual violence, and exploitation for displaced people. An academic gender analysis should document such patterns without using allegations casually or treating all soldiers as perpetrators. It must rely on verified investigations, distinguish individual responsibility from collective stereotyping, and recognize that sexual violence in conflict can be a deliberate strategy, an opportunistic crime, or both. Accountability requires evidence, survivor protection, and legal processes rather than propaganda.

Media, Online Abuse, and Prevention

Contemporary gendered violence also operates through digital systems. Harassment, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, sexualized threats, stalking, impersonation, doxing, and coordinated abuse can produce serious psychological and physical danger even when no attacker is in the same room. Women in public life, journalists, activists, and members of marginalized groups often face abuse designed not merely to insult them but to force withdrawal from public participation. Masculinity is relevant when online communities treat cruelty as entertainment, equate empathy with weakness, or build status through humiliation of women and gender minorities. Platform design can amplify this behavior by rewarding outrage and visibility, while anonymity and cross-platform coordination make enforcement difficult. Yet censorship is not a complete solution. Policies must distinguish threats, targeted harassment, protected criticism, satire, and political disagreement. Platforms should provide usable reporting tools, preserve evidence, respond rapidly to credible danger, and explain enforcement decisions. Schools and families should teach digital consent and the permanence of shared material rather than focusing only on restricting girls' behavior.

Prevention works best when it changes environments as well as individuals. WHO's gender-transformative framework emphasizes challenging unequal power relations, strengthening relationship skills, ensuring services, making environments safer, preventing childhood abuse, reducing economic stress, and transforming attitudes and norms. Programs for men and boys are most useful when they do more than ask men to protect women. The protector model can preserve the idea that men possess authority. Effective approaches encourage shared responsibility, consent,

emotional literacy, nonviolent conflict resolution, equitable caregiving, and active intervention when peers promote abuse. Survivor services must remain confidential, accessible, culturally appropriate, disability-inclusive, and free from victim-blaming. Justice responses should protect due process while recognizing why delayed reporting, incomplete memory, continuing contact with an abuser, or emotional complexity do not prove that violence did not occur. Institutions should measure patterns, not only individual incidents, because repeated complaints, retaliation, and informal protection networks reveal structural problems.

Conclusion

Gendered violence is produced through the interaction of unequal power, social norms, institutional practices, and individual choices. Masculinity becomes harmful when it is defined through entitlement, emotional suppression, dominance, sexual access, or the need to prove strength by controlling others. It can also be reconstructed around responsibility, courage, care, restraint, and equality. Gender analysis should never imply that violence is biologically inevitable or that every man benefits equally from existing arrangements. It should explain why certain forms of violence are disproportionately directed at women and gender minorities, why men often experience pressure to use or endure violence, and how organizations reward or punish particular behaviors. The most effective response combines survivor-centered services, accountable institutions, fair legal processes, education about consent, economic and social support, and sustained work with men and boys. Changing masculinity is not about removing strength from men; it is about separating strength from domination and making nonviolence, empathy, and respect socially credible forms of power.

References

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