

# The Perils of Patriarchy for Men as well as Women: Another Mass Shooting, another Reason to Begin Discussing Violence and Gender

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(Image: [Aiming gun](#) via Shutterstock)

Between 1982 and mid-2013, there were [67 mass shootings](#) across the United States.<sup>[1]</sup> As [Mother Jones](#) reports, mass shootings are defined as the killing of four or more people, not including the killer, in a single event. Thirty of these shootings occurred between 2006 and 2013. This list grew on September 16, 2013, when [Aaron Alexis](#), a 34-year-old former Navy Reservist, killed 12 people and wounded several others on a District of Columbia naval base. Alexis, too, was killed during a shootout with police.<sup>[2]</sup>

Following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, former NRA Executive Vice President Wayne Lapiere [explained](#) these events in part by stating: "The truth is that our society is populated by an unknown number of genuine monsters."<sup>[3]</sup> Joseph Engeldinger disagrees. Speaking of his nephew, Andrew, Joseph said, "I can only assume there was some kind of mental break there. He wasn't a monster. ... He was a real good kid, a real good person. He had a real good heart. ..."<sup>[4]</sup> Certainly what Andrew did was evil. But the simplistic notion that such evil - causing profound unjustified pain and suffering to others - is the

work of "genuine monsters" obscures the truth that the capacity for evil lurks in virtually all of us. Just as importantly, it obscures the social factors facilitating such evil, factors that are at least partially within our control.

One crucial factor associated with violence is gender, a lens that dictates "proper" characteristics, interests, and even behavioral trends. While Lapiere wishes to placate our fears (and undermine demands for stricter gun laws) with talk of "monsters," a far more significant and undeniable fact about 66 of the past 67 mass murderers is that they were [men](#). This is a fact that often goes without notice - or at least without acknowledgement. Even Michael Moore's thoughtful post-Sandy Hook [discussion](#) of American violence[5] failed to identify the relevance of gender. Moore wrote that the slogan, "Guns don't kill people" is incomplete: "Guns don't kill people, Americans kill people." Given that the vast majority of our nation's violent acts, including gun violence, are perpetrated by men, a truer clarification of this saying would be: "Guns don't kill people, (far too many) American men kill people."

### **“Boys Will Be Boys”**

Mass shootings are only part of the story. The oft-ignored yet fundamental connection between men and violence is attested to in everyday headlines across the U.S.: 23-year-old former Marine Terence Tyler kills two co-workers after firing 16 rounds from an assault rifle in a suburban supermarket he worked at in New Jersey (August 31, 2012). 58-year-old Jeffrey T. Johnson opens fire outside of New York's Empire State Building, where he worked, killing a former co-worker (August 24, 2012). A man uses a "sharp-edged weapon" to kill his teacher and himself in a community college classroom in [Wyoming](#) (November 2012).[6] Kansas City Chiefs linebacker Jovan Belcher kills his 22-year-old girlfriend, Kasandra Perkins - who was the mother of their 3-month-old daughter. Belcher, 25, then drives to the team's practice facility. Despite the pleas of his coaches - whom Belcher thanked for all they had done for him - he kills [himself](#) (December 2012).[7]

In 2013, a 5-year-old boy accidentally shot and killed his [2-year-old sister](#) in Kentucky. The accident occurred while he was playing with a .22 caliber single-shot Crickett rifle, marketed especially for children under the brand name "My First Rifle." [8] Other recent headlines include: "Minnesota: 9-Year-Old Boy Killed After Man Opens Fire on Passing Traffic"; "Paralympic Champion Oscar Pistorius Charged with Murdering Girlfriend"; "[2 Dead in Shooting \[by a man\] at University of Maryland.](#)"

Men are responsible for the majority of violence in this nation. According to the FBI's 2010 statistics on crime, men made up 90 percent of the [11,000 murder offenders](#) whose gender was known.[9] Men also were [responsible](#) for 77 percent of aggravated assaults, 84 percent of burglaries, 82 percent of arsons, 74 percent

of offenses against the family and children, and 99 percent of rapes.[10] According to Futures without Violence, while three-quarters of those who commit family violence are men, women make up 84 percent of spousal-abuse victims and 86 percent of those abused by a romantic partner.[11] Considering that men make up just 49.2 percent of the U.S. population, these statistics should be alarming.[12] The many, many men who enact the majority of our nation's and the world's violence - are they monsters? And why are so many silent, including progressives, about the role gender socialization plays in violence?

Even when it is recognized that men are the culprits for such violence, few talk about the relevance of our socially constructed gender norms. Black intellectual and feminist bell hooks writes that many are hungry for answers about why male rage occurs with such lethal frequency:

*"Every day on our television screens and in our nation's newspapers we are brought news of continued male violence at home and all around the world. When we hear that teenage boys are arming themselves and killing their parents, their peers, or strangers, a sense of alarm permeates our culture. Folks want to have answers. They want to know, why is this happening? Why so much killing by boy children now, and in this historical moment?"[13]*

A long-standing explanation given by some audacious enough to acknowledge the gendered character of violence boils down to "boys will be boys." Indeed, many hold a pessimistic vision that suggests men are biologically prone, if not destined, for violent lives. But when I look at my sensitive and nonaggressive 9-year-old son, Julian, and my precious infant son, Winter, I find it hard to believe that these beings are destined for viciousness. Essentialist dismissals of biological "males" as aggressive and violent are not helpful tools for uprooting the structures that perpetuate the violence that plagues our culture. More useful would be a feminist critique and reconception of the self-fulfilling prophecy that defines "men" around notions of violence.

### **A Feminist Response to the Model of Masculine Violence**

In Men Speak Out, Shira Tarrant writes that "There is nothing traditional, universal, or eternal about our current conventions of masculine gender." [14] This model of masculinity is a social construction, inspired by patriarchy, and it can be unmade by us just as it was created.

But what is patriarchy exactly? Patriarchy is a worldview or conceptual framework that presupposes the superiority of males over females and perpetuates such a belief system in social institutions. In exchange for accepting a gendered system that denigrates women's full human worth, men have been given a variety of social privileges. Among them is increased likelihood of having personal and political power over women, including legal, economic, and sexual advantages. As one of the most influential of all Western philosophers, Aristotle,

put it in "[Politics](#)" (350 BCE), "The family is the association established by nature for the supply of men's everyday wants. ... " Nearly 2,000 years later, in his 1748 defense of republicanism, *The Spirit of Laws*, the French philosopher and key innovator of representative governance, Montesquieu, warned of the [dangers](#) of too much equality: "Wives, children, slaves will shake off all subjection. No longer will there be any such thing as manners, order, or virtue." The list of male intellectuals advocating naked patriarchy is [exhaustive](#).[\[15\]](#)

Patriarchy is a broadly embraced worldview that informs dominant gender norms that dictate "proper" socio-cultural roles for the male and female sexes. It further altogether ignores the realities of transgender, gender-nonconforming and intersex people, who don't fit into a readymade compartment.

Violence has long been the weapon of choice to assert one's self-worth within patriarchal culture and is often motivated to overcome perceived "dignity-denial" or dehumanization - denying one's [moral status](#). Drawing on his research and direct experience with perpetrators of violence, psychiatrist James Gilligan [notes](#) that "the basic psychological motive, or cause, of violent behavior is the wish to ward off or eliminate the feeling of shame and humiliation ... and replace it with its opposite, the feeling of pride."[\[16\]](#) In addition to feelings of profound shame, triggers for violence include a variety of factors including the feeling that nonviolent alternatives to restoring one's dignity are unavailable and the failure to feel "empathy, love and concern for others."[\[17\]](#) These violence-abating feelings are linked to femininity, and men who embrace them are often chastised for weakness. And the devaluation of "feminine feelings" such as empathy increasingly marks broader social and governmental practices. As Henry Giroux has pointed out, Americans are increasingly encouraged to limit their compassion and to adopt such "[masculine](#)" [hardness](#).[\[18\]](#) This phenomenon is growing not only in terms of interpersonal relations, but also in social [policy](#).[\[19\]](#)

Bell hooks [contends](#) that the patriarchy is the "most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit in our nation."[\[20\]](#) Throughout its more than 4,000-year history, Western patriarchal culture has never meaningfully wavered from its advocacy of violence as the fundamental tool to resolve disputes, be it between nations or between individuals, and to establish support for claims of "manhood," a term that has historically been synonymous with "dignity" or inherent worth. As Gilligan [explains](#): "Masculinity, in the traditional, conventional stereotypical sex-role of patriarchy, is literally defined as involving the expectation, even the requirement, of violence, under many well specified conditions: in time of war; in response to personal insult; in response to extramarital sex on the part of a female in the family; while engaging in all-male combat sports; etc."[\[21\]](#)

Armed with the threat of shame and emasculation, patriarchy fosters the expectation and demand that males seek control over connection, silence their emotions or risk identification with the "inferior sex," and resolve major problems including profound internal turmoil by turning to force. They are to form identities based on the pillars of emotional detachment, stoic toughness and mental and physical exhibitions of dominance. This patriarchal model of masculinity does not encourage nonviolent emotional expression nor does it remind others that men's well-being requires such opportunities. Instead, "real" men are encouraged to act impervious and indifferent to physical and emotional pain. In practice, this means men are supposed to contain and shove down their feelings. But these feelings cannot be repressed forever. For this reason, anger is perhaps the most commonly glamorized and accepted form of manly emotional expression. Patriarchy's bargain with men deprives them of human wholeness, giving them anger - much of it socially condoned - as their defining quality and mode of expression.[22]

### **Policing Patriarchal Gender Codes**

Under patriarchy, masculinity is taught as the antithesis of femininity as well as its superior. From a very young age, boys are subjected to a pervasive education in the patriarchal masculine ideal. Just take a walk through the toy aisles of a mainstream department store. There you will find aisles filled with pink baby dolls, household items and the like, beckoning girls to enact roles as mothers, helpmates and homemakers. While our society cultivates mothering along with patriarchal compliance in young girls, boys are, on the other hand, being prepared to wage war through endless marketing of war toys, war games and military dress-up. Neither boys nor girls are permitted to freely explore and develop a multifaceted identity. Instead they are pressured or shamed into fitting themselves into limited one-dimensional models of selfhood. A failure to conform to these manufactured gender codes is not tolerated. Some time ago, my wife, April, watched a mother pull her 3-year-old son away from a dazzling pink shelf of "girl" toys, noting, "Oh, this is girl stuff." Down the war-boy aisle he went.[23]

Males who attempt to develop a fuller humanity are confronted early on by gender shaming, reproach for failing to exemplify dominant gendered expectations. As a professor and father of young children, I've heard countless stories and witnessed events where boys and young men have been shamed for a range of behaviors from brushing a sister's hair to crying over a breakup, nurturing role playing, crying over the death of a friend, articulating their fears or asking for help, to wearing pink or holding a girlfriend's purse.

Policing of patriarchal gender codes is done by family members of all genders - plus teachers and coaches, friends and foes, conservatives and progressives alike. In maintaining gender stereotypes that identify care, nurturance and love as more natural and appropriate to women, we prevent boys from discovering and

nurturing fundamental human qualities necessary not only to their health but also to the prevention of violence. These sorts of early but formative experiences lay the groundwork for men's alienation from not only traditionally "feminine" values like compassion but also from women and children.

### **Beyond Patriarchal Masculinity, Toward Human Wholeness**

Could it be that men's violence is often a thinly veiled mask worn to hide or destructively cope with fear, vulnerability and self-doubt - feelings patriarchal masculinity teaches are not appropriate feelings for men, feelings that, when they surface, are to be silently eradicated and denied until they disappear? Could it be that violent eruptions that take place every day, whether they are televised or not, result from an impossible demand for men to suppress their emotions? Could it be that many violent men epitomize what they wish you to never see: weakness, pain, hurt, all cryptically expressed in one of the few ways dominant culture has deemed legitimate for men, anger and rage?

Many, many men, both those who have committed violence and those who continue to desperately look for places to hide their inadequacies, their fears, simply cannot match the masculine ideal taught to them from boyhood. As hooks [puts it](#), patriarchy "demands of men that they become and remain emotional cripples";[\[24\]](#) it "has denied males access to full emotional well-being, which is not the same as feeling rewarded, successful or powerful because of one's capacity to assert control over others."[\[25\]](#) In short, as she puts it, "Patriarchy promotes insanity;" it "undermines their mental health."[\[26\]](#)

Many of these life-destroying violent outbursts, be they mass killings, spousal abuse or suicides, are likely the work of vulnerable, self-doubting, fearful and anxiety-ridden men, men who could no longer believe they met internalized social expectations for true manhood. And so they expressed this pain, hurt and desperate desire for respect in one of the few ways dominant culture has deemed legitimate for men: through anger, rage and violent force.[\[27\]](#)

Even if all assault rifles were banned and loopholes in gun laws closed, the most normalized forms of violence - including domestic violence, sexual assault, suicide and shootings by legal-abiding gun-owners - would continue. The time has come to not only push for sensible gun-control measures but also for people of all political stripes to ask serious and likely personally challenging questions about the everyday gender socialization of boys and men. For the trouble we face is caused not by monsters, but by the men made from the boys we've reared. The true monster is patriarchy and the dehumanization it perpetuates.

- [1] Mark Follman, Gavin Aronsen, and Deanna Pan, "[A Guide to Mass Shootings in America](#)," Mother Jones, February 27, 2013
- [2] "[How Did D.C. Navy Yard Gunman Get Security Clearance While Being Treated by VA for Mental Illness?](#)," Democracy Now, September 17, 2013
- [3] "[Blood on Your Hands": CODEPINK Interrupts NRA's Wayne LaPierre as He Calls for Guns in U.S. Schools](#)," Democracy Now, December 26, 2012
- [4] "Minneapolis Shooter Spared Some, Shot Others; Fifth Victim Dies," ABC News, September. 28, 2012
- [5] Michael Moore, "[It's the Guns - But We All Know, It's Not Really the Guns.](#)" July 24, 2012
- [6] Mead Gruver, "[Police: Wyo. murder-suicide happened during class](#)," The Associated Press, November 30, 2012
- [7] Doug Farrar, "[Police: Kansas City Chiefs linebacker Jovan Belcher kills girlfriend, takes own life](#)," Shutdown Corner, December 1, 2012
- [8] "[Brother, 5, Kills Infant Sister With Children's Rifle](#)," Democracy Now, May 2, 2013
- [9] FBI. "[Murder Offenders by Age, Sex, and Race, 2010.](#)"
- [10] FBI. "[Ten-Year Arrest Trends by Sex, 2001–2010.](#)"
- [11] Futures without Violence. "[Get the Facts: The Facts on Domestic, Dating and Sexual Violence.](#)"
- [12] Census. "[Age and Sex Composition: 2010](#)," May 2011
- [13] bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 11.
- [14] Shira Tarrant, *Men Speak Out: Views on Gender, Sex, and Power* (2013), 12-13.
- [15] In *The Confessions* (397-401 CE), St. Augustine, another architect of patriarchy and the renowned church father responsible for the theory of original sin, further articulates patriarchal male privilege when he celebrates his mother, Monica's servitude to her husband. Monica endured her husband's "marital infidelities" without quarreling, continually showing him "mercy." Despite her husband's hot temper, Monica "learned to offer him no resistance, by deed or even by word, when he was angry." Augustine explains how his mother criticized women complaining about their husbands' acting violently against them, simultaneously indicating the normality of men's violence against women. "There were plenty of women married to husbands of gentler temper whose faces were badly disfigured by traces of blows, who while gossiping together would complain

about their husbands' behavior." Monica assails them for failing to recognize that their marriage contracts were "legal documents which made slaves of them." Women who wished to be spared the savagery of their husbands "ought to keep their subservient status in mind and not defy their masters." For more examples see my work, "[Exhuming the History of Feminist Masculinity: Condorcet, 18th Century Radical Male Feminist.](#)"

[16] James Gilligan, *Preventing Violence* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 29.

[17] Gilligan, 36-37.

[18] "Marked by a virulent notion of hardness and aggressive masculinity, a culture of depravity has become commonplace in a society in which pain, humiliation and abuse are condensed into digestible spectacles of violence endlessly circulated through extreme sports, reality TV, video games, YouTube postings and proliferating forms of the new and old media." Henry A. Giroux, "[Reveling in the Pain of Others: Moral Degeneracy and Violence in the 'Kill Team' Photos](#)," Truthout, June 20, 2011

[19] Ibid. Giroux: "But the ideology of hardness and the economy of pleasure it justifies are also present in the material relations of power that have intensified since the Reagan presidency, when a shift in government policies first took place and set the stage for the emergence of an unchecked regime of torture and state violence under the Bush-Cheney regime. Conservative and liberal politicians alike now spend millions waging wars around the globe, funding the largest military state in the world, providing huge tax benefits to the ultra-rich and major corporations, and all the while draining public coffers, increasing the scale of human poverty and misery and eliminating all viable public spheres - whether they be the social state, public schools, public transportation, or any other aspect of a formative culture that addresses the needs of the common good."

[20] hooks, 17

[21] Gilligan, 56

[22] In his documentary, *Tough Guise* (1999), Jackson Katz draws on a varied survey of the pop-culture landscape to make the case that the dominant model of masculinity, what he calls a "tough guise," is one that normalizes extreme toughness and routine disregard for individual safety and health; rugged individualism at the expense of interconnection with others; and violence as one of the salient expressions of true masculinity.

[23] Beyond the toy aisles, boys are subjected to a media diet of the Four D's: "dares, destructiveness, domination and death." Take for instance the popular children's program "Destroy, Build, Destroy" (Cartoon Network), now entering its fourth season. The live-action game show pits two teams against each other



with the objective of building different kinds of mechanical objects. The team that wins the competition is then rewarded by destroying their competitor's creation. (In the event of a tie, each team has its creation destroyed by the opposing team.) These programs reinforce the dominant social idea about men and boys, namely that they are born aggressive and thrive on destruction. The authors of *Packaging Boyhood* (2009) write: "Action cartoons targeting boys can have a cocky, sarcastic tone, where the characters sound a lot like younger versions of the characters in *Rambo* or *Die Hard*, offering up funny, glib comments when the characters are in the most danger. ... In fact, excluding the steady stream of vile language in the R-rated versions, someone reading the scripts would have a hard time telling the difference." Brown, Lamb, and Tappan, p.54

[24] hooks, 27.

[25] hooks, 31

[26] hooks, 30.

[27] This is in part an unsurprising outcome given the way the power-elite in our society are promulgating both the denial of basic recognition of human equality and the shrinking of concern and understanding for the poor and downtrodden. Simultaneously, dominant culture addresses the growing economic and power disparity by glamorizing "power-over-others," from foreign policy, domestic economic policy, and the Hollywood big screen, as fundamental the indicator of one's human worth. Moral equality as in equality of worth is crucial to fostering a truly peaceful and just society.

<http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/19316-boys-will-be-boys-how-valorizing-masculine-violence-is-killing-society>