



The Gender of Violence

To be or not to be: that is the question:
Whether tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them?

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
Hamlet

I am not insane. I am angry. I killed because people like me are mistreated every day. I did this to show society, "Push us and we will push back."

—LUKE WOODHAM, 1997

Two sentiments—a question and an answer—separated by four centuries. Does one suffer, or does one seek revenge? Get mad or get even? Each has an unacceptably high price: Luke Woodham resolved the dilemma by stabbing his mother to death and then killing two students in his Pearl, Mississippi, high school in October 1997. Two months later, three students were killed in Paducah, Kentucky. And four students and a teacher were killed in Jonesboro, Arkansas, in March 1998. Both Woodham and the two boys who opened fire in Jonesboro were said to be distraught after being snubbed by girls. Suffer a loss? Or make someone pay?

As a nation, we are preoccupied by violence. We fret about "teen violence," complain about "inner-city crime," or fear "urban gangs." We express shock at the

violence in our nation's public schools, where metal detectors crowd the doorways, and knives and guns crowd out pencils and erasers in students' backpacks. Those public school shootings left us speechless and sick at heart. Yet when we think about these wrenching events, do we ever consider that, whether white or black, inner city or suburban, these bands of marauding "youths" or these troubled teenagers are virtually all young men?

Nightly, we watch news reports of suicide bombings in the Middle East or terrorist attacks on the United States or on our (and our allies') outposts abroad or of racist attacks against Turks in Germany or Pakistanis in London or of homophobic gay-bashing murders or of Colombian drug lords and their legions of gun-toting thugs or of the well-armed right-wing militias. Do these reports ever mention that virtually every single one of these terrorists, suicide bombers, or racist gangs is male? Do they investigate how ideologies of masculinity may have contributed to the motivation for such heinous crimes?

Seldom do the news reports note that virtually all the violence in the world today is committed by men. Imagine, though, if the violence were perpetrated entirely by women. Would that not be *the* story, the only issue to be explained? Would not a gender analysis occupy the center of every single story? The fact that these are men seems so natural as to raise no questions, generate no analysis.

Take a couple of recent examples. In 1993, *Youth and Violence*, the American Psychological Association's Commission on Violence and Youth report, attributed rising rates of violence to access to guns, involvement in gangs, mass media violence, physical punishment, parental neglect, substance abuse, poverty, prejudice, and absence of antiviolence programs. The next year, the Carnegie Corporation devoted an entire issue of its quarterly journal to "Saving Youth from Violence" and came up with a list of factors that contribute to youth violence, including frustration, lack of social skills, being labeled as "dumb," poverty, abuse, neglect, drugs, alcohol, violent video games, and the availability of guns. Neither of these blue-ribbon panels' reports mentioned the word "masculinity."¹

You would think the numbers alone would tell the story: Men constitute 99 percent of all persons arrested for rape, 90 percent of those arrested for murder, 88 percent of those arrested for robbery, 79 percent for aggravated assault, 75 percent of other assaults, 75 percent of all family violence, 74 percent of disorderly conduct. Men are overwhelmingly more violent than women. Nearly 90 percent of all murder victims are killed by men, according to the United States Department of Justice's Uniform Crime Reports.²

From early childhood to old age, violence is the most obdurate, intractable behavioral gender difference. The National Academy of Sciences puts the case starkly: "The most consistent pattern with respect to gender is the extent to which male criminal participation in serious crimes at any age greatly exceeds that of females, regardless of source of data, crime type, level of involvement, or measure of participation." "Men are always and everywhere more likely than women to commit criminal acts," write criminologists Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi.³ Yet how do we understand this obvious association between masculinity and violence? Is it a product of biology, a fact of nature, caused by something inherent in male anatomy? Is it universal? In the United States, what has been the historical

association between gender and violence? Has that association become stronger or weaker over time? What can we, as a culture, do to prevent or at least ameliorate the problem of male violence?

There has surely been no shortage of explanations for male violence. Some researchers rely on biological differences between women and men, suggesting that “the durability, universality and generality of the relative aggressiveness of males” points definitively toward a genetic difference. So, for example, some scholars argue that androgens, male hormones, especially testosterone, are what drive male aggression. It is true that testosterone is highly correlated with aggressive behavior: Increased testosterone levels typically result in increased aggression. Other scholars have looked to more evolutionary explanations such as homosocial competition, in which male violence is the result of the evolutionary competition for sexual access to females. Men fight with each other to create dominance hierarchies; the winners of those fights have their choice of females.⁴

But, as we saw earlier, by itself the biological evidence is unconvincing. Although testosterone is associated with aggression, it does not cause the aggression but rather only facilitates an aggressiveness that is already present. (It does nothing for nonaggressive males, for example.) Nor does the causal arrow always point from hormone to behavior. Winners in athletic competition experience increased testosterone levels *after* they win. Violence causes increased testosterone levels; hormonal increases cause violence. Nor does testosterone cause violence against those who are significantly higher on the dominance ladder. Increased testosterone will cause a midlevel male baboon, for example, to increase his aggression against the male just below him, but it will not embolden him to challenge the hierarchical order.⁵

In fact, there is also little evidence to support the evolutionary theory of homosocial competition. In some cultures, males are not in the least violent or competitive with each other. If “boys will be boys,” as the saying goes, they will be so differently in different cultures. And, in some societies, including ours, males are especially violent against females—the very group they are supposedly competing for. (To murder or assault the person you are trying to inseminate is a particularly unwise reproductive strategy.) Sociologist Judith Lorber intelligently reframes the question:

When little boys run around noisily, we say “Boys will be boys,” meaning that physical assertiveness has to be in the Y chromosome because it is manifest so early and so commonly in boys. But are boys universally, the world over, in every social group, a vociferous, active presence? Or just where they are encouraged to use their bodies freely, to cover space, take risks, and play outdoors at all kinds of games and sports?⁶

Following Freud, some psychoanalysts have looked for an explanation of male violence in the Oedipal drama: The frustration of the young boy’s sexual desires is translated into aggression (the frustration-aggression hypothesis). Stated more neutrally, the young boy must constantly and publicly demonstrate that he has successfully separated from his mother and transferred his identity to his father—that is, that he has become masculine. Male violence is a way to prove successful masculinity.

Or, at least, an adaptive strategy for males to avoid becoming prey themselves. In a fascinating study, Barbara Ehrenreich argues that the origins of war lie less in an

innate propensity for aggression and a lust for predation than in the fear that we are slated to become someone else's dinner entree. The origins of society lie in defense—we became social not because we had some deep need for sociability, but rather because only together could we defend ourselves successfully. Thus, she argues, the near-universal association of masculinity and war is compensatory and defensive, a “substitute occupation for underemployed male hunter-defenders.”⁷

Although not necessarily describing a cultural universal, these psychological models do help explain the particular association of masculinity with violence, especially among younger males. (There are, of course, many societies in which masculinity is not associated with violence.) In particular, psychologists have pointed out how violence is a form of masculine emotional expressiveness, as if the only legitimate emotion a man could express was rage. Hamlet's complex argument addressing the moral choices before him becomes Luke Woodham's self-justifying shrug.

Psychological explanations often assume universal generalizability. They take little account of either cross-cultural variation or the historical shifts in any culture over time. But such cultural and historical shifts are important if we are adequately to explain violence in the first place. In the 1980s, two social anthropologists reversed the question: What can we learn from those societies in which there is very little violence? They found that the definition of masculinity had a significant impact on the propensity toward violence. In societies in which men were permitted to acknowledge fear, levels of violence were low. But in societies in which masculine bravado—the posture of strength and the repression and denial of fear—was a defining feature of masculinity, violence was likely to be high. It turns out that those societies in which bravado is prescribed for men are also those in which the definitions of masculinity and femininity are very highly differentiated.⁸

So societies in which gender inequality is highest are those where masculinity and femininity are seen to be polar opposites, and thus they are societies that mandate “masculine bravado.” For example, Joanna Overing tells us that in the Amazon jungle, the extremely violent Shavante define manhood as “sexual bellicosity,” a state both superior to and opposed to femininity, whereas their peaceful neighboring Piaroas define manhood *and womanhood* as the ability to cooperate tranquilly with others in daily life. In sum, these are a few of the themes that anthropologists have isolated as leading toward both interpersonal violence and intersocietal violence:

1. the ideal for manhood is the fierce and handsome warrior
2. public leadership is associated with male dominance, both of men over other men and of men over women
3. women are prohibited from public and political participation
4. most public interaction is between men, not between men and women or among women
5. boys and girls are systematically separated from an early age
6. initiation of boys is focused on lengthy constraint of boys, during which time the boys are separated from women; taught male solidarity, bellicosity; and endurance; and trained to accept the dominance of older groups of men
7. emotional displays of male virility, ferocity, and sexuality are highly elaborated

8. the ritual celebration of fertility focuses on male generative ability, not female ability
9. male economic activities and the products of male labor are prized over female⁹

One of the most significant “causes” of male violence, then, is gender inequality. And the victims of this are not only women, but also men.¹⁰ Taken together, these works provide some policy-oriented goals toward which we might look if we are to reduce the amount of gendered violence in society. First, it seems clear that the less gender differentiation between women and men, the less likely will be gendered violence. This means the more “like women” men can be seen—nurturing, caring, frightened—and the more “like men” women can be seen—capable, rational, competent in the public sphere—the more likely that aggression will take other routes besides gendered violence.¹¹

Men’s violence against women is the result of entitlement thwarted; men’s violence against other men often derives from the same thwarted sense of entitlement. I imagine that there is a curvilinear relationship between male-to-male violence and male-to-female violence and the entitlement to patriarchal power. To find peaceful societies, we might want to look at societies in which entitlement to power is either not thwarted or not present. Societies with the least male-male gendered violence would be those in which patriarchy is either intact and unquestioned or else hardly present at all and hasn’t been for some time.

THE GENDER OF CRIME

If we are to understand the association of masculinity and violence, we must, therefore, be specific. First, we must look at different groups of men. Surely, violence is

The “Gender” of War and Peace

What do you think: Are war and peace somehow more masculine or feminine? If women were running things, do you think there would be less risk of violence and war?

Of course, if you subscribed to more biological arguments about brain chemistry or testosterone, you might agree with that idea: If you believe that males are programmed by evolution to be violent and competitive, or driven to aggression by testosterone, then you might also believe that you might well sleep more peacefully if tomorrow morning, you awakened to a world in which every single political office—every local, national, and global institution—were staffed entirely by women.

But, you might say, what about those women who *are* in political office? They’re no less bellicose

than their male counterparts! What about Margaret Thatcher, Golda Meir, or Indira Gandhi?

And you’d be thinking sociologically. A sociological approach would consider the gender of the *person* occupying the office, as well as the gender of the *office* itself. Of course, it’s true that if you raise one gender to be nonviolent empathic listeners, who encourage children to “use their words,” they might be less prone to use violence in public life. But it’s just as true that certain offices require that one be willing, if one deems it necessary, to authorize violence.

Violence is the product of both gendered people and gendered institutional and political arrangements.

not evenly distributed among all groups of men but rather varies by class, race, age, region, ethnicity, and sexuality. Second, we must explore the historical fluctuations of that association and compare the contemporary United States with other industrial countries.

When we do that, an astonishing picture emerges. Stated most baldly: *Young American men are the most violent group of people in the industrialized world.* Our homicide rate is between five to twenty times higher than that of any other industrial democracy, and we imprison five to twenty times more people than does any other country on Earth except Russia. (Some might say that our prison population is so much higher because our crime rate is higher; others argue the opposite case, that our crime rate is so high because our prison population is so high. I think that both are partly true but that the relationship between prison and crime is not what common sense would have us believe. Prisons not only deter crime, but also teach criminals how to commit crime.) Nine out of ten male murder victims were killed by other men; and nine out of ten female murder victims were killed by men. In 2005, young men between ages fifteen and twenty-four had a homicide rate of 37.2 per 100,000. This figure is about ten times higher than that of the next-closest industrialized country, Italy, and more than sixty times greater than that of the same age group in England.¹²

And it's getting worse. Between 1985 and 1994, the number of homicides by fourteen- to seventeen-year-old males more than tripled—as has the number of men in prison. In 1971, the American prison population was about 200,000. Less than thirty years later it had mushroomed to more than 1.5 million convicted criminals incarcerated in the nation's 1,500 state and federal prisons, with another half-million sitting in the country's 3,000 local jails. That's a rate of 645 per 100,000 Americans. On any given day, one out of every three African American men in his twenties is either in prison, in jail, on probation, or on parole, compared with 17 percent of Hispanic males and 5.9 percent of white males.¹³ In 2008, five states—Vermont, Michigan, Oregon, Connecticut, and Delaware—spent more on prisons than on higher education.¹⁴

According to the California Highway Patrol, nine out of ten of those arrested for drunk driving are men, 84 percent of those who are jailed for fatal accidents resulting from drunk driving are men, and 86 percent of arson crimes are committed by men. In fact, the classic profile of the arsonist is entirely gendered. "Look for a passive, unmarried man between the ages of 18 and 30 who lacks a capacity to confront people," according to Allan Hedberg, a California psychologist who studies arsonists. "Big forest fires with massive fire trucks and Pandemonium are a way of making a masculine statement for an unstable young man who in the past has been wronged."¹⁵

On the other side of the police ledger, the statistics are also revealing. Although fewer than 5 percent of high-speed chases involve suspects wanted for violent felonies—most of the suspects are suspected of traffic violations—20 percent of all high-speed chases end in serious injury or death, most often of innocent bystanders. Why? Because it is almost always younger male officers who do the chasing. In one study in southern Florida, "winning a race" was cited by officers as the objective in a pursuit.¹⁶

Criminologist Marvin Wolfgang notes that violent crime rises any time there is an unusually high proportion of the population of young men between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. Psychiatrist James Gilligan observes that the only two innate biological variables that are predictors of violence are youth and maleness. The relationship is

immediately apparent if you look at a chart, as in figure 13.1 for mid-nineteenth-century Britain. And things aren't so different today, as you can see from a similar chart for Chicago between 1965 and 1990 (see figure 13.2).

Taken separately, gender and age are the two most powerful predictors of violence. Men are far more violent than women, and the likelihood of violence by either gender decreases as one ages. Consider, for example, the data from a survey of high school seniors in 1994. Nearly one-fifth of high school boys reported that they hurt someone so badly that he or she needed to be bandaged or to see a doctor. One-twentieth of girls reported that level of violence.

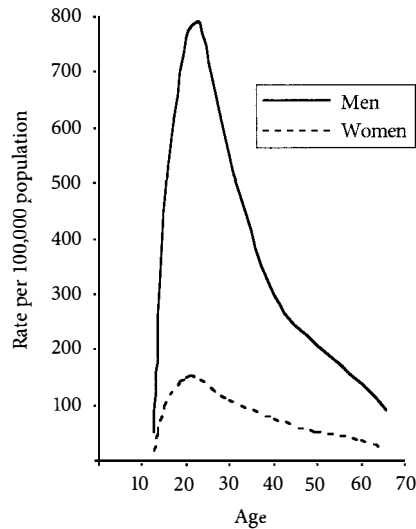


Figure 13.1. Criminal offenders by age and gender, England and Wales, 1842–1844. Based on data from F. G. P. Neison, *Contributions to Vital Statistics*, ... 3d ed. (London, 1857), 303–304, as plotted by Travis Hirschi and Michael Gottfredson, “Age and the Explanation of Crime,” *AJS*, 89 (1983): 556.

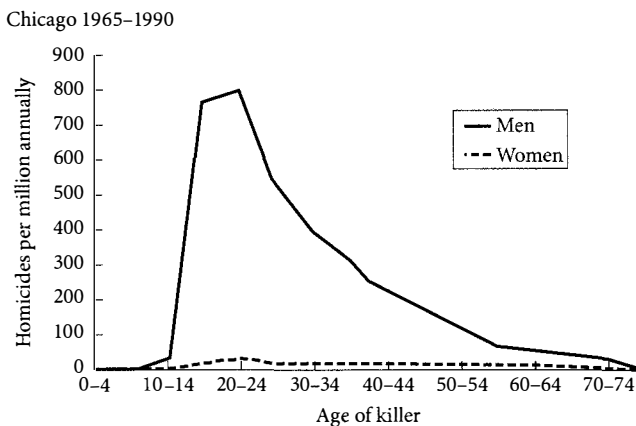


Figure 13.2. Homicide rates in Chicago, 1965–1990, by age and gender. From “Darwinism and the Roots of Machismo,” *Scientific American*, special issue, 2002.

“MEAN GIRLS” AND FEMALE CRIMINALITY

Nonetheless, we should not pretend that just because males are overwhelmingly more likely to commit an act of violence or a crime that women never do so. In fact, there is some interesting evidence about criminality among women. Certainly, women commit crimes. But which crimes they commit and their reasons for committing them are sometimes very different from men's. In the mid-1970s, two sociologists noted that crime rates for women were increasing significantly. Freda Adler and Rita Simon each argued that there was evidence of increasing rates of women's criminality. And each blamed feminism. “Is it any wonder,” asked Adler, “that once women were armed with male opportunities they should strive for status, criminal as well as civil, through established male hierarchical channels?” Simon nuanced her claims a bit more, arguing that feminism actually decreased the rates of female violent crime, because women were less subject to direct male control but that feminism increased the rates of property crimes.¹⁷

Some contemporary analysts blame feminism not for the increase in women's criminality, but rather for our ignorance of it. “Women commit the majority of child homicides in the United States, a greater share of physical child abuse, an equal rate of sibling violence and assaults on the elderly, about a quarter of child sexual abuse, an overwhelming share of the killings of newborns, and a fair preponderance of spousal assaults,” writes Patricia Pearson, and yet we still think violence is entirely the province of the male. As we will see, many of these statistics hinge on curious misreadings of the data, but even if they were entirely accurate, the number of child or newborn homicides is so minuscule that even if women committed all of them, the gender ratio of homicide would barely move.¹⁸

What's more interesting is that although both claims may be politically useful to those who want to return women to their “natural” place in the home, they are not supported by the empirical evidence. First of all, the most interesting long-term historical evidence suggests that women's criminality has actually *decreased* since the eighteenth century. Court records reveal a steady decline in women's arrests and prosecutions since the eighteenth century, brought about, in part, by changes in the definition of femininity and the “cult of domesticity” that made women angels of their households:

By the end of the nineteenth century, there was a clear separation of home and work, a firmer sexual division of labor, the exclusion of women from the public sphere and from productive work, and the confinement of women to reproductive and domestic work in the home. . . . [T]here was also a decline in female criminal court involvement during this period.¹⁹

Despite the increases in crime rates for women over the past few decades, the base numbers were so small to begin with that *any* modest increase would appear to be a larger percentage increase than that among men. In fact, the sex differential in crime has remained roughly the same when seen as a number per 100,000 of population. Then it becomes clear that, as one criminologist put it simply, “relative to males, the profile of the female offender has not changed.”²⁰

Violent crimes by women actually seem to have decreased. Among females, murder is the most prevalent form of violent crime, and nearly two-thirds of those women convicted of murder killed a relative, intimate, or someone else they knew (compared

with less than one-third of the men). Over the past twenty years, the rate at which men are killed by their wives has fallen by close to two-thirds, whereas the rate at which women are killed by their intimate partners has fallen by one-third, which was the overall decline in the nation's homicide rate from 1981 to 1998.²¹ (Although women convicted of murder receive, on average, a sentence more than three years shorter than that of men convicted of murder, this sentencing differential seems to have less to do with the gender of the murderer and more to do with the circumstances of the murder, the past criminal history of the murderer, and the murderer's relationship to the murdered—that is, men who murder an intimate partner tend to receive sentences roughly equal in length to those of the women.)²² At least part of the explanation for this precipitous decline in the women's homicide rate must be the expansion of services for battered women, so that now women whose intimate partner batters and/or rapes them have alternatives that support their leaving the relationship.²³

There have been some reported increases in women's property crime, especially fraud, forgery, and embezzlement, but most of those increases have been in petty theft—i.e., shoplifting, committing credit card fraud, passing bad checks. Crimes that seem to be most attractive to women are those that, like shoplifting, enable women to express their desires without taking responsibility for them. They want, they desire, they crave—but they know that femininity requires the suppression of desire. Shoplifting is “stealing beauty,” as in the title of a recent film; stealing sexuality, adulthood, lust, and passion—without loss of reputation. As criminologist Jack Katz argues:

the young girls seem especially seduced by items of makeup, jewelry, and clothes: things used to cover up the naked female self, to give the body the appearance of the mature female, and to make the self dazzlingly attractive to a world blinded to the blemishes underneath. Females take symbols of adult female identity—cosmetics, jewelry and sexy underwear.²⁴

If, Katz argues, shoplifting is the prototypical “female” crime because it is about satisfying desire without taking responsibility, then the stick-up is the prototypical “male” crime: fast, aggressive, dangerous, and violent. (Men outnumber women in arrests for robbery by about fifteen to one.) And directly personal. The “badass” stick-up guy is phallic power—hard and tough, using his gun to threaten penetration. Street robbery may make little rational sense as a way of making money, but it is still enormously appealing to young males; it's a way of “doing gender”:

Unless it is given sense as a way of elaborating, perhaps celebrating, distinctively male forms of action and ways of being, such as collective drinking and gambling on street corners, interpersonal physical challenges and moral tests, cocky posturing and arrogant claims to back up “tough” fronts, stickup has almost no appeal at all.²⁵

Yet the evidence on gender and violence does not lead to the conclusion that all men are violent, rapacious beasts and that all women are angelic and nonviolent little lambs. Societies that have high rates of male crime also tend to have high rates of female crime. We need to remember that the three most common arrest categories—for both women and men—are driving under the influence, larceny-theft, and “other except traffic” (a category that includes mostly criminal mischief, public disorder, and minor offenses). Taken together, these three offense categories account for 48 percent of all

male arrests and 49 percent of all female arrests. It's when crime turns violent that the gender patterns emerge most starkly.²⁶

There is evidence of female violence, of course—but it remains dramatically different from men's violence. For example, women's violence tends to be defensive, whereas men are more often the initiators of violent acts. And whereas men's violence may be instrumental—designed to accomplish some goal—or expressive of emotion, women's violence often is the outcome of feeling trapped and helpless. For example, the types of violent crimes that women are either as likely or more likely to commit than men—child homicide, child abuse, assault on the elderly, murder of newborns,—as well as female-initiated spousal abuse or spousal murder—seem to stem from terror and helplessness.²⁷

The gendered patterns of violence among children are also revealing. Among three-year-olds, for example, the most frequent acts of violence are boy-to-boy; girl-to-girl violence, by contrast, is the least frequent. Boy-to-girl violence is far more frequent than girl-to-boy. In one study, two Finnish psychologists contrasted physical, verbal, and “indirect” forms of aggression. They found that girls at all ages (except the youngest) were more likely to engage in indirect aggression (telling lies behind a person's back, trying to be someone's friend as revenge to another, saying to others, “let's not be friends with him or her”). Boys at all ages were more likely to engage in direct aggression (kicking, hitting, tripping, shoving, arguing, swearing, and abusing) and verbal aggression. Girls at all ages were also more likely to use peaceful means (talking to clarify things, forgetting about it, telling a teacher or parent) to resolve problems and were also more likely to withdraw or sulk.²⁸

We have some evidence that the gender gap in violence is decreasing. One study from Finland found that girls in the 1980s were much less violent than in the 1990s, both from self-reports and from reports of their peers. The study also found greater acceptance of violence among the girls. But in the late 1990s, the study found, violence had a more positive connotation for girls, “something that makes the girl feel powerful, strong, and makes her popular”—in short, doing for girls what violence and aggression have historically done for boys.²⁹

A spate of recent books about girls' aggression throws new light on these issues.³⁰ Some writers, like Rachel Simmons, argue that such indirect aggression may have devastating effects on girls' development, self-esteem, and aspirations:

Unlike boys, who tend to bully acquaintances or strangers, girls frequently attack within tightly knit friendship networks, making aggression harder to identify and intensifying the damage to the victims. Within the hidden culture of aggression, girls fight with body language and relationships instead of fists and knives. In this world, friendship is a weapon, and the sting of a shout pales in comparison to a day of someone's silence. There is no gesture more devastating than the back turning away.

But girls' indirect forms of aggression are not the expression of some innately devious feminine wiles, but rather the consequences of gender inequality. “Our culture refuses girls access to open conflict, and it forces their aggression into nonphysical, indirect, and covert forms. Girls use backbiting, exclusion, rumors, name-calling, and manipulation to inflict physical pain on targeted victims,” Simmons writes. Indirect horizontal

aggression is the safest and easiest way to express one's anger. Were girls permitted the kind of aggression that boys are, they would not express their anger in such back-handed ways.³¹

Evidence of women's increased violence—that is, of a decreasing gender gap—is still scant and spotty. In the United States, women constitute only 6.6 percent of the prison population (about seventy-five thousand inmates)—a 10 percent increase since 1995. One-half of women prisoners are incarcerated in just four states—Florida, Texas, California, and New York. The female inmate population tends to mirror the male inmate population demographically (not in terms of offenses), including a disproportionate number of nonwhite, poor, and undereducated and unemployed women. Violence remains perhaps the most gendered behavior in our culture.³²

GENDERED VIOLENCE: AN INSTITUTIONAL PROBLEM

After he had successfully tested a nuclear bomb in November 1952, creating a fusion explosion about one thousand times more powerful than the fission bomb that destroyed Hiroshima seven years earlier, Edward Teller, the Nobel Prize-winning nuclear physicist, wrote the following three-word telegram, to his colleagues: "It's a boy." No one had to point out to Teller the equation of military might—the capacity for untold violence—with masculinity. Such a tragic connection remains fixed for both the military heroes of our masculine fantasies and the bespectacled scientists who create the technology that enables those Rambo-wannabes to conquer the world.

It would be easy to catalog all the phallic images and rhetoric in that vast historic parade of military heroes in decorated uniforms and scientists in white lab coats, suggesting that proving masculinity is a common currency for both warrior and wonk, gladiator and geek. Pop psychologists have yet to run out of sexually tinged phrases to describe this; one feminist calls masculine militarism a case of "missile envy"; another writes about how men "created civilization in the image of a perpetual erection: a pregnant phallus." But these images turn gender into a screen against which individuals project their psychological fears and problems, reducing war and the state's use of institutional violence to a simple aggregation of insecure men desperate to prove their masculinity. Although this argument is not entirely without merit, as we shall see, it leaves us without an understanding of the institutional violence that is implicit in the construction of the modern bureaucratic state. For that understanding we need to explore the link between the two realms, how "militarism perpetuates the equation between masculinity and violence" and how war "encodes violence into the notion of masculinity generation after generation."³³

Though masculinity may be associated historically with war, the way we fight today would leave many men without the ability to test and prove their manhood in a conventional military way. After all, most soldiers today are not combatants. Most are in support services—transport, administration, technical support, maintenance. The increasingly technological sophistication of war has only sped up this process—nuclear weapons, "smart bombs," automatic weaponry, self-propelled military vehicles, and long-distance weapons all reduce the need for Rambo-type primitive warriors and increase the need for cool, rational button-pushers.³⁴

Yet there is something powerful in the ways that our political leaders seek to prove an aggressive and assertive masculinity in the political arena. War and its technology

confer upon men a “virile prestige,” as French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir put it. Think of Andrew Jackson’s man-making slaughter of the Seminoles or Theodore Roosevelt’s thundering about the strenuous life as he charged up San Juan Hill. For much of our history, our political leaders have tried to balance manly restraint with equally manly belligerence. Military prowess and the willingness to go to war have been tests of manhood. Explaining why President Lyndon Johnson continued to escalate the war in Vietnam, a biographer writes

He wanted the respect of men who were tough, real men, and they would turn out to be hawks. He had unconsciously divided people around him between men and boys. Men were activists, doers, who conquered business empires, who acted instead of talked, who made it in the world of other men, and had the respect of other men. Boys were the talkers and the writers and the intellectuals, who sat around thinking and criticizing and doubting instead of doing.

(In case you find such sentiments strange, think about the cliché “those who can do, and those who can’t do, teach.”) When opponents criticized the war effort, Johnson attacked their masculinity. When informed that one member of his administration was becoming a dove on Vietnam, Johnson scoffed, “Hell, he has to squat to piss!” And, as Johnson celebrated the bombings of North Vietnam, he declared proudly that he “didn’t just screw Ho Chi Minh. I cut his pecker off.”³⁵

Such boasts continue to plague American politics. Jimmy Carter’s reluctance to intervene in Iran led one security affairs analyst to comment that the United States was “spreading its legs for the Soviet Union” and led to the election of Ronald Reagan, who promised to rescue America from its post-Vietnam lethargy—which he accomplished, in part, by invading small countries like Grenada. As one political commentator put it, Reagan “made mincemeat of Mr. Carter and Mr. Mondale, casting them as girly-boys who lacked the swagger necessary to lead the world.” George H. W. Bush inherited the right to that masculine mantle when he invaded Panama and the Persian Gulf for Operation Desert Storm. Bill Clinton’s popularity ratings soared when, during his impeachment hearings in 1998, he threatened and eventually undertook air strikes against Iraq. And George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq proved popular enough to ensure Republican electoral victories and to knock the corporate scandals of his friends’ companies, the failure of the war against terrorism, and an economic recession off the front page (figure 13.3).³⁶

Such presidential sentiments both trickle down to those who are charged with creating and fighting those wars and bubble up to policymakers from the defense strategists who are trained to prosecute those wars and who are today calculating the megatonnage and kill ratios for future ones. “There is among some people a feeling of compulsion about the pursuit of advanced technologies—a sense that a man must be continually proving his virility by pioneering on the frontiers of what is only just possible.” In an article about masculinity and the Vietnam War, journalist I. F. Stone illustrated this compulsive proving of masculinity among those who planned the war. At a briefing about the escalation of the bombing of North Vietnam, one Pentagon official described the U.S. strategy as two boys fighting: “If one boy gets the other in an arm lock, he can probably get his adversary to say ‘uncle’ if he increases the pressure in sharp, painful jolts and gives every indication of willingness to break the boy’s arm.”



Figure 13.3. Courtesy of Scott Applewhite/AP Images.

And recently, when a German politician indicated he was concerned about popular opposition to Euromissile deployment, one American defense strategist opined that, “Those Krauts are a bunch of limp-dicked wimps.”³⁷

Carol Cohn conducted an ethnographic analysis of defense intellectuals. She recalls that “lectures were filled with discussion of vertical erector launchers, thrust-to-weight ratios, soft lay-downs, deep penetration, and the comparative advantage of protracted versus spasm attacks—or what one military advisor to the National Security Council has called ‘releasing 70 to 80 percent of our megatonnage in one orgasmic whump.’ There was serious concern about the need to harden our missiles, and the need to ‘face it, the Russians are a little harder than we are.’ Disbelieving glances would occasionally pass between me and my ally—another woman—but no one else seemed to notice.”³⁸

It would be simplistic to reduce the complexities of military and political decisions to psychological “pissing contests,” but it is equally important to include a discussion of gender in our investigations. From the top political leaders to military strategists and technological experts, issues of gender play themselves out in the formulation of military policy. And public opinion also plays an important role in these demonstrations of sexual potency. Recall, for example, how during the Gulf War, our enemy Saddam Hussein was constantly sexualized on bumper stickers that read, “Saddam, Bend Over” and “U.S.A.—Up Saddam’s Ass,” insults that equated military conflict with homosexual rape. One widely reprinted cartoon showed Saddam Hussein bending over as if in Muslim prayer, with a huge U.S. missile approaching, about to penetrate him from behind. Thus was the sexual nature of military adventurism played out in sexual paraphernalia.

AMERICA: A HISTORY OF GENDERED VIOLENCE

Although we commonly think that all states require the use of violence—that the creation and maintenance of politics require both a police force and a military to

subdue both ourselves and others—the equation of violence and masculinity remains a particularly strong one for Americans. The United States has a long and bloody history of specifically gendered violence, in which both individual men and Americans as a nation have demonstrated and proved manhood. It's not just our political and military leaders—although, as we have seen, they certainly have had their issues as well. One psychologist speaks of a “civic advocacy of violence as socially acceptable, appropriate and necessary.” Our most venerated cultural heroes were soldiers—or, at least, the actors who played them in the movies.³⁹

Historians suggest that this particularly American, and particularly tragic, code of violence arrived in the eighteenth century, imported and developed by Scottish and Irish immigrants to the American South, where brawling, dueling, fighting, hunting, and drinking became the means to express manhood. Andrew Jackson's mother told her son, arguably the most mean-tempered and violent president in our nation's history, that “the law affords no remedy that can satisfy the feelings of a true man.” The American frontier—perhaps the single largest collection of younger males in the history of the industrialized world—provided a legacy of violence to American life. Violence has always been highest in those places where young men gather, especially away from the “civilizing” effect of women.⁴⁰

In the aftermath of the Civil War, after the South had suffered a humiliating and emasculating defeat, young boys took to placing chips of wood on their shoulders, daring other boys to knock off the chips so the boys could legitimately fight with them. Only in America is “having a chip on one's shoulder” considered a badge of honor among boys. More than that, violence was seen as legitimate—as long as it was retaliatory. If someone else knocked that chip off, kicking his ass was a reasonable response. In her penetrating analysis of American violence, anthropologist Margaret Mead described the typically American refusal to initiate aggression but a willingness to retaliate far out of proportion to the original offense in “an aggression which can never be shown except when the other fellow starts it” and which is “so unsure of itself that it had to be proved.” Remember these words the next time you watch two young boys square off in a playground. “You wanna start something?” one of them yells. “No, but if you start it, I'll finish it!” replies the other. No one wants to take responsibility for the initial act of aggression, but everyone wants to finish the fight.⁴¹

Violence has long been understood as the best way to ensure that others publicly recognize one's manhood. Fighting was once culturally prescribed for boys, who, the theory went, needed to demonstrate gender identity. In one of the best-selling advice manuals of the first part of the twentieth century, parents learned that

There are times when every boy must defend his own rights if he is not to become a coward and lose the road to independence and true manhood... The strong willed boy needs no inspiration to combat, but often a good deal of guidance and restraint. If he fights more than, let us say, a half dozen times a week,—except, of course, during his first week at a new school—he is probably over-quarrelsome and needs to curb. The sensitive, retiring boy, on the other hand, needs encouragement to stand his ground and fight.

In this best seller, boys were encouraged to fight once a day, except during the first week at a new school, when, presumably, they would fight more often!⁴²

Lurking beneath such advice was the fear that boys who were not violent would not grow up to be real men. The spectre of the “sissy”—encompassing the fears of emasculation, humiliation, and effeminacy that American men carry with them—is responsible for a significant amount of masculine violence. Violence is proof of masculinity; one is a “real” man, because one is not afraid to be violent. Psychiatrist James Gilligan speaks of “the patriarchal code of honor and shame which generates and obligates male violence”—a code that sees violence as the chief demarcating line between women and men.⁴³

The contemporary code of violence of the streets descended from old southern notions of honor—a man had to be ready to fight to prove himself in the eyes of others. Southern whites called it “honor”; by the turn of the twentieth century it was called “reputation.” By the 1950s northern ghetto blacks spoke of “respect,” which has now been transformed again into not showing “disrespect,” or “dissing.” It’s the same code of violence, the same daring. Listen to one New York gang member, describing the reasons that his gang requires random knife slashings as initiation rituals. “Society claims we are notorious thugs and killers but we are not,” he says. “We’re a family of survivors, . . . proud young black men living in the American ghetto. Harlem princes trying to rise up and refusing to be beaten down.” Another man recalls his days in a juvenile detention facility where “you fought almost every day because everybody trying to be tougher than the next person.” Another street hood gives a contemporary slant to the old “chip on the shoulder” when he describes what he calls the “accidental bump” when a male is walking around Spanish Harlem “with your chest out, bumping into people and hoping they’ll give you a bad time so you can pounce on them and beat ’em into the goddamn concrete.” Sociologist Vic Seidler writes that “as boys, we have to be constantly on the alert to either confront or avoid physical violence. We have to be alert to defend ourselves . . . Masculinity is never something we can feel at ease with. It’s always something we have to be ready to prove and defend.” And criminologist Hans Toch adds that “in cultures of masculinity, the demonstrated willingness to fight and the capacity for combat are measures of worth and self-worth.”⁴⁴

Masculinity is still often equated with the capacity for violence. From the locker room to the chat room, men of all ages learn that violence is a socially sanctioned form of expression. Male socialization is a socialization to the legitimacy of violence—from infantile circumcision to violence from parents and siblings to routine fights with other boys to the socially approved forms of violence in the military, sports, and prison (the United States is the only industrialized country that still employs capital punishment) to epigrams that remind us that we should get even, not mad, and that the working world is the Hobbesian war of each against all, a jungle where dogs eat dogs.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Men learn that violence is an accepted form of communication among men and between women and men. It’s so commonplace, so deeply woven into the fabric of daily life, that we accept violence as a matter of course—within families, between friends, between lovers. Most victims of violence know their attackers; many know them intimately. Nearly one in five victims of violence treated in hospital emergency rooms was injured by a spouse, a former spouse, or a current or former boyfriend or girlfriend. Violence

Not Just Whistlin' Dixie

What if I told you it's not just age and gender that are good predictors of violence, but also region? That young southern white men are more prone to violence than young men in any other part of the country? Sound far-fetched?

In the early 1990s, two Michigan psychologists, Dov Cohen and Richard Nisbett, conducted an experiment to find out. They invited young men to fill out a questionnaire in a classroom building at the university, and then to drop it off at the end of the hallway and then return to the classroom. Half the guys did just that. The other half, however, encountered another guy (a confederate of the experiment) in the narrow hallway, who opened a drawer in a filing cabinet as the "subject" walked by. The hallway was even narrower now, and the

confederate looked up, annoyed, and slammed the filing cabinet drawer shut and muttered, in an audible voice, "Asshole,"

Cohen and Nisbett then did a series of tests to see if the insult had any effect on the guys who experienced it. They watched and recorded their faces. They shook their hands to see if their grip changed. They took saliva samples to measure testosterone levels. They asked the guys to read a short story and to supply an ending (to see if the insulted guys's ending was more violent).

For some of the guys, being insulted caused no changes at all. (They were like the control group who simply walked down the hall.) But for some of the guys, the insult changed a lot. And virtually all of them were from the South. (Northerners were more



Figure 13.4. ©The New Yorker Collection 2002, Matthew Diffie from cartoonbank.com. All rights reserved.

amused by it, and their reactions were unchanged.) Young white guys from the South, Cohen and Nisbett concluded, are driven by a strict code of honor; insult that honor and they are ready to fight.

Think of it this way. When the Canadian Neil Young wrote a song condemning racism in the South, some young white southern boys took it as a slur on the South itself. That code of honor kicked into high

gear and Lynyrd Skynyrd penned one of the angriest hymns to their home state of Alabama. Maybe white southerners are, as Floridian Tom Petty put it, “born a rebel.”

Source: Robert Nisbett and Dov Cohen, *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South* (Boulder: Westview, 1996).

can be a private, personal, and intimate language, just as it can be a mode of public address between societies and social groups.

The gender imbalance of intimate violence is staggering. Of those victims of violence who were injured by spouses or ex-spouses, women outnumbered men by about nine to one. Eight times more women were injured by their boyfriends than men were injured by girlfriends. The United States has among the highest rates in the industrial world for rape, domestic violence, and spousal murder. Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women in the nation, claiming nearly four million victims a year. Between one-third and one-half of all women are assaulted by a spouse or partner at some point during their lives. Between 30 percent and 40 percent of all women who are murdered are murdered by a husband or a boyfriend, according to the FBI. Every six minutes a woman in the United States is raped; every eighteen seconds a woman is beaten, and every day four women are killed by their batterers.⁴⁵

Interestingly, while rates of intimate partner violence have decreased over the past two decades, that decrease is almost entirely in the rates of *male* victims.

Intimate Homicide Victims by Gender: 1976–2004

Year	Women	Men
1976	1,596	1,348
2004	1,159	385

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics. <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/intimate/victims.htm>.

It doesn't have to be this way, of course. As we saw earlier, societies may be located on a continuum from rape-free to rape-prone. Anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday found that the best predictors of rape-proneness were levels of militarism, interpersonal violence in general, ideologies of male toughness, and distant father-child relationships. Those societies in which rape was relatively rare valued women's autonomy (women continued to own property in their own name after marriage) and valued children (men were involved in child rearing). Stated most simply, “the lower the status of women relative to men, the higher the rape rate.” What does that tell us about women's status in the United States?⁴⁶

In fact, the United States has the highest rate of reported rape in the industrial world—about eighteen times higher than England's. Between 12 percent and 25 percent

of all American women have experienced rape, and another 12–20 percent have experienced attempted rape. That means that between one-fourth and nearly one-half of all women have been sexually assaulted and that between two-thirds and four-fifths of these rapes involved acquaintances. One calculation estimates that between 20 percent and 30 percent of all girls now twelve years old will suffer a violent sexual attack during their lives.⁴⁷

What is, perhaps, more frightening, is that of those twelve-year-old girls, 16 percent of them have *already* been raped. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, over half (54 percent) the women raped in 2000 (a typical year) were juveniles under eighteen years old, and 21.6 percent were younger than twelve. Another study found that 96 percent of those female rape victims under twelve knew their attackers. In one of five cases, their rapist was also their father. Although there is some evidence that suggests that females under eighteen are also the most likely to file false reports of rape with the police (though virtually none of these allegations ever went to trial, and all the reports were retracted in the interview stage), these false reports seem to be the result of fears of pregnancy and the hope that declaring they were raped would permit the females to get an abortion, because in many states, abortion is legal only in cases of rape or a threat to the mother's health. But these cases of rape of young girls can hardly be subsumed under some vague and insulting heading of relationship "miscommunication."⁴⁸

The recent revelations of pervasive child sexual abuse by Catholic priests (and the church's subsequent efforts to cover up these crimes) reminds us of how vulnerable boys are as well. Although these revelations have been shocking, pedophile sexual abuse should not be confused with homosexual rape; pedophilia is a "sexual orientation," not a variation of homosexuality. Pedophile priests are erotically attracted not to members of their own sex, but rather to children (some choose boys, others choose girls, and some are indiscriminant). The erotic charge comes from the presumed seductive innocence of the child, not the attraction of one's own gender. And boys are no more vulnerable to same-sex sexual assault by their peers (as opposed to adults) in the Catholic Church than they are in any other mostly single-sex and gender-unequal institution.

As we saw in earlier chapters, different theoretical schools offer different explanations for all sorts of rape. Arguments that rape is simply the reproductive strategy for losers in the sexual arena are unconvincing. Equally unconvincing are psychological arguments that rape is an isolated, individual act, committed by sick individuals who experience uncontrollable sexual impulses. After all, almost 75 percent of all rapists plan their rapes. And only about 5 percent of rapists can be categorized as psychotic. Nor is it persuasive to blame alcohol or drugs as the cause of men losing control. Why, then, wouldn't women lose control of themselves in the same way?

An adequate explanation of rape has to recognize that it is men who rape women and ask the more frightening question: Why do so many "otherwise" typical, normal men commit rape? As sociologist Allan Johnson puts it, how can such a pervasive event be the work of a few lunatics? "It is difficult to believe that such widespread violence is the responsibility of a small lunatic fringe of psychopathic men," he writes. "That sexual violence is so pervasive supports the view that the focus of violence against women rests squarely in the middle of what our culture defines as 'normal' interaction between men and women." The reality is that rape is committed by all-American, regular guys. And,

on campus, “[c]ollege women are at greater risk of being raped or aggressed against by the men they know and date than they are by lunatics in the bushes.”⁴⁹

Surveys of college women reveal the prevalence of rape, and surveys of college men indicate how casually rape can be viewed. Mary Koss’s research on campus date and acquaintance rape, although the subject of vicious backlash attacks, remains the most impressive and thorough research we have on rape’s frequency and scope. She found that nearly half (44 percent) of all women surveyed experienced some forms of sexual activity when they didn’t want to, 15 percent experienced attempted rape, 12 percent were coerced by drugs and alcohol, a full 25 percent had sexual intercourse when they didn’t want to because they were “overwhelmed” by a man’s overwhelming arguments and pressure, and 9 percent were forcibly raped. The National College Women Sexual Victimization Study, published in 2000, estimated that between 20 and 25 percent of college women experience completed or attempted rape during their college years.⁵⁰

No wonder feminist writer Susan Griffin called rape “the all-American crime,” engaged in by normal, all-American guys. Yet it is also equally true that most men do not commit rape. In several surveys, many men indicated that they would consider rape—provided the conditions were “right” and they knew that they would not get caught. In a survey of American college men, 28 percent indicated that they would be likely to commit rape and use force to get sex; 6 percent said they would commit rape but not use force, and 30 percent said they might use force but would not commit rape. Forty percent indicated that they would neither use force nor commit rape—less than half! In another survey, 37 percent indicated some likelihood of committing rape if they were certain they would not be caught.⁵¹

Something still holds men back—well, at least some men! Is it simply the fear of being caught? Or is it that they can’t quite take demonstrating their masculinity to that next level? In a sense, what we see is not that rapists are nonconformists, psychologically unbalanced perverts who couldn’t otherwise get sex but rather that rapists are actually *overconformists*—exceptionally committed to a set of norms about masculinity that makes every encounter with every woman potentially, even inevitably, about sexual conquest, that turns every date into a contest, and that turns a deaf ear to what a woman might want because, after all, women aren’t men’s equals to begin with. “The most striking characteristic of sex offenders,” writes one researcher, “is their apparent normality.” Bernard Lefkowitz, author of a chillingly detailed portrait of a gang-rape of a mentally retarded girl by several high-status high school athletes in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, argues that “[f]or a lot of boys, acting abusively toward women is regarded as a rite of passage. It’s woven into our culture.” So any discussion of rape has to take account of the ordinariness of the crime within the normative definition of masculinity and of the empirical reality that despite all that, most men do not and never will commit rape. If rape is normative, are nonrapists not real men?⁵²

In a fascinating study of convicted rapists, sociologist Diana Scully develops these themes. Scully found that rape was used by men “to put women in their place,” she writes. “Rape is a man’s right,” one convicted rapist told her. “If a woman doesn’t want to give it, a man should take it. Women have no right to say no. Women are made to have sex. It’s all they are good for. Some women would rather take a beating, but they always give in; it’s what they are for.” Men rape, Scully concludes, “not because they are

Oh Really?

Rapists are sick individuals who otherwise can't get sex.

Actually, that's not true at all. In her fascinating study of convicted rapists, sociologist Diana Scully found that rapists are just as likely to have regular sexual partners as non-rapists. In fact, they have higher rates (so much for being sexual "losers" as the evolutionary psychologists claimed.) They're just as likely to be married and fathers as nonrapists. And most showed little evidence of mental illness.

Source: Diana Scully, *Understanding Sexual Violence*. (New York: Routledge, 1991).

idiosyncratic or irrational, but because they have learned that in this culture sexual violence is rewarding" and because "they never thought they would be punished for what they did."⁵³

Rape is a crime that combines sex and violence, that makes sex the weapon in an act of violence. It's less a crime of passion than a crime of power, less about love or lust than about conquest and contempt, less an expression of longing than an expression of entitlement. You might think that when men think about rape, then, they think about the power they feel.

You'd be wrong. Listen to the voice of one young man, a twenty-three-year-old stockboy named Jay in a San Francisco corporation, who was asked by author Tim Beneke to think about under what circumstances he might commit rape. Jay has never committed rape. He's simply an average guy, trying to imagine the circumstances under which he would commit an act of violence against a woman. Here's what Jay says:

Let's say I see a woman and she looks really pretty and really clean and sexy and she's giving off very feminine, sexy vibes. I think, wow I would love to make love to her, but I know she's not interested. It's a tease. A lot of times a woman knows that she's looking really good and she'll use that and flaunt it and it makes me feel like she's laughing at me and I feel degraded . . . If I were actually desperate enough to rape somebody it would be from wanting that person, but also it would be a very spiteful thing, just being able to say "I have power over you and I can do anything I want with you" because really I feel that they have power over me just by their presence. Just the fact that they can come up to me and just melt me makes me feel like a dummy, makes me want revenge. They have power over me so I want power over them.⁵⁴

Jay speaks not from a feeling of power, but rather from a feeling of powerlessness. "They have power over me so I want power over them." In his mind, rape is not the initiation of aggression against a woman, but rather a form of revenge, a retaliation after an injury done to him. But by whom?

Beneke explores this apparent paradox by looking at language. Think of the terms we use in this culture to describe women's beauty and sexuality. We use a language of violence, of aggression. A woman is a "bombshell," a "knockout," a "femme fatale." She's "stunning," "ravishing," "dressed to kill." We're "blown away," "done in." Women's

beauty is experienced by men as an act of aggression: It invades men's thoughts, elicits unwelcome feelings of desire and longing, makes men feel helpless, powerless, vulnerable. Then, having committed this invasive act of aggression, women reject men, say no to sex, turn them down. Rape is a way to get even, to exact revenge for rejection, to retaliate. These feelings of powerlessness, coupled with the sense of entitlement to women's bodies expressed by the rapists Diana Scully interviewed, combine in a potent mix—powerlessness and entitlement, impotence and a right to feel in control. The astonishing, shamefully high U.S. rape rate comes from that fusion.

Thus rape is less a problem of a small number of sick individuals and more a problem of social expectations of male behavior, expectations that stem from gender inequality (disrespect and contempt for women) and may push men toward sexual predation. A completed rape is only the end point on a continuum that includes sexual coercion as well as the premeditated use of alcohol or drugs to dissolve a woman's resistance. In the most famous study of college men's behaviors, Mary Koss and her colleagues found that one in thirteen men admitted to forcing (or attempting to force) a woman to have sex against her will, but 10 percent had engaged in unwanted sexual contact, and another 7.2 percent had been sexually coercive. In another study, Scott Boeringer found that more than 55 percent had engaged in sexual coercion, 8.6 percent had attempted rape, and 23.7 percent had provided drugs or alcohol to a woman in order to have sex with her when she became too intoxicated to consent or resist (which is legally considered rape in most jurisdictions). Such numbers belie arguments that rape is simply the crime of sick individuals.⁵⁵

Men's feelings of both powerlessness and entitlement are also part of the backdrop to the problem of violence in the home. Though the family is supposed to be a refuge from the dangerous outside world, a "haven in a heartless world," it turns out that the home is, for women and children, the single most dangerous place they can be. Not even the legal "protection" of marriage keeps women safe from the threat of rape, and levels of violence against women in the home are terrifyingly high. Family violence researcher Murray Straus and his colleagues concluded that "the American family and the American home are perhaps as or more violent than any other American institution or setting (with the exception of the military, and only then in time of war)."⁵⁶

Marriage certainly doesn't protect women from rape. In one study of 644 married women, 12 percent reported having been raped by their husbands. One researcher estimates that between 14 percent and 25 percent of women are forced by their husbands to have sexual intercourse against their will during the course of their marriage, whereas, another claims that about one-third of women report having "unwanted sex" with their partner. In yet another study of 393 randomly selected women, a date or a spouse was more than three times more likely to rape a woman than was a stranger, a friend, or an acquaintance. Fully 50 percent of the sample reported more than twenty incidents of marital rape, and 48 percent indicated that rape was part of the common physical abuse by their husbands. In that study, David Finklehor and Kirsti Yllo also found that nearly 75 percent of the women who had been raped by their husbands had successfully resisted at least once; that 88 percent reported that they never enjoyed being forced; and that 22 percent had been sexually victimized as children.⁵⁷

One of the more dramatic changes in rape laws has been the removal of exemptions of husbands from prosecution for rape. As recently as 1985, more than half of

the states in the United States still expressly prohibited prosecution for marital rape on the grounds that women had no legal right to say no to sex with their husbands. When a woman said “I do,” it apparently also meant “I will... whenever *he* wants to.” Although by 1993, all states had declared marital rape a crime “at least where force is used,” according to the National Clearinghouse on Marital and Date Rape, as of 1996, the exemption still applies in several states where the husband and wife are living together (not separated), and only five states have extended such protection to unmarried men and women who co-habit. Family researcher Richard Gelles described the scope of this problem in his testimony before the New Hampshire state legislature in 1981, when that state was considering removing the marital exemption from prosecution:

In reality, marital rape is often *more traumatic* than stranger rape. When you have been intimately violated by a person who is supposed to love and protect you, it can destroy your capacity for intimacy with anyone else. Moreover, many wife victims are trapped in a reign of terror and experience repeated sexual assaults over a period of years. When you are raped by a stranger you have to live with a frightening memory. *When you are raped by your husband, you have to live with your rapist.*⁵⁸

Marital rape is a significant problem in other countries as well, where husbands remain excluded from prosecution, because a man is legally entitled to do whatever he wants with his property. And wife abuse is also a chronic problem in other countries. In Hong Kong and Quito, Ecuador, for example, as many as 50 percent of all married women are estimated to be regularly beaten by their husbands.⁵⁹

Though domestic violence is certainly a problem in other countries, it also appears that rates of wife abuse in the United States are among the highest in the world. Battery is the major cause of injury to women in the United States. More than two million women are beaten by their partners every year. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 85 percent of all victims of domestic violence are women. Between two-thousand and four-thousand women a year are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends. Another study found that nearly half of all women murdered in New York City were killed by their husbands or boyfriends. (Only about 3 percent of all male homicides are committed by wives, ex-wives, or girlfriends.)⁶⁰

As we saw earlier, not only are the rates for spousal murder significantly different for women and men, but also the events leading up to such murder are different. R. Emerson and Russell Dobash and their colleagues argue that

men often kill wives after lengthy periods of prolonged physical violence accompanied by other forms of abuse and coercion; the roles in such cases are seldom if ever reversed. Men perpetrate familial massacres, killing spouse and children together; women do not. Men commonly hunt down and kill wives who have left them; women hardly ever behave similarly. Men kill wives as part of planned murder-suicides; analogous acts by women are almost unheard of. Men kill in response to revelations of wifely infidelity; women almost never respond similarly, though their mates are more often adulterous.⁶¹

It is also worth noting that these disparate rates of spousal homicide in Western societies are relatively modest compared with the rates in developing societies, where the ratio

is even greater. Where patriarchal control is relatively unchallenged, assault, rape, and even murder may be seen less as a crime and more as a prerogative.⁶²

GENDER “SYMMETRY” IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

Despite the overwhelming evidence of the problems of domestic violence against women, we often hear a small chorus of voices shouting about “husband abuse.” When one sociologist claims that the abuse of husbands by wives is the most underreported form of domestic violence, suddenly legions of antifeminists trot out such arguments in policy discussions. Some of the studies of “gender symmetry” in domestic violence—a presumption that rates of domestic violence are roughly equal by gender—suggest that women are “as likely” to hit men as men are to hit women and that women commit 50 percent of all spousal murders. These studies provide “facts,” such as that 1.8 million women suffered one or more assaults by a husband or boyfriend and that over two million men were assaulted by their wives or girlfriends; that 54 percent of all violence labeled as “severe” was committed by women; or that among teenage dating couples, girls were more violent than boys. (Ironically, the people who claim equivalent rates of domestic violence are often the same people who argue that women and men are biologically different and that women are not biologically aggressive enough to enter the military or serve on police forces.) One obviously confused journalist suggests that because “only” 3–4 percent of women are battered each year, “we ought to consider it the unfortunate behavior of a few crazy men.” (If 3–4 percent of all men were stricken with testicular or prostate cancer each year, or were victims of street assault, this same journalist would no doubt consider it a national emergency and try to mobilize the entire medical community or the National Guard—and perhaps both!)⁶³

If these data were true, you might ask, why are there no shelters for battered men, no epidemics of male victims turning up in hospital emergency rooms, no legions of battered men coming forward to demand protection? (Well, that’s not entirely true. O. J. Simpson did call himself an “abused husband” after he beat up his former wife Nicole. And one shelter for battered men did open in Vancouver, Canada, but closed within two months because no one came to it.) Partly, these pundits tell us, because men who are victims of domestic violence are so ashamed of the humiliation, of the denial of manhood, they are unlikely to come forward and are more likely to suffer in silence the violent ministrations of their wives—a psychological problem that one researcher calls “the battered husband syndrome.” “Because men have been taught to ‘take it like a man’ and are ridiculed when they feel that they have been battered by women, women are nine times more likely to report their abusers to the authorities,” observe two writers. And partly, the pundits tell us, because the power of the “feminist lobby” is so pervasive, there has been a national cover-up of this demonstrably politically incorrect finding. As one polemicist puts it,

While repeated studies consistently show that men are victims of domestic violence at least as often as are women, both the lay public and many professionals regard a finding of no sex difference in rates of physical aggression among intimates as surprising, if not unreliable, the stereotype being that men are aggressive and women are exclusively victims.⁶⁴

Such assertions are not supported by empirical research at all, and the inferences drawn from them are even more unwarranted. For example, in the original study of “the battered husband syndrome,” sociologist Susan Steinmetz surveyed fifty-seven couples. Four of the wives, but not one husband, reported having been seriously beaten. From this finding, Steinmetz concluded that men simply don’t report abuse, that there must be a serious problem of husband abuse, that some 250,000 men were hit every year—this, remember, from a finding that no husbands were abused. By the time the media hoopla over these bogus data subsided, the figure had ballooned to twelve million battered husbands every year!⁶⁵

One problem is the questions asked in the research. Those studies that found that women hit men as much as men hit women asked men and women if they had ever, during the course of their relationship, hit their partner. An equal number of women and men answered yes. The number changed dramatically, though, when men and women were asked who initiated the violence (was it offensive or defensive?), how severe it was (did she push him before or after he’d broken her jaw?), and how often the violence occurred. When these three questions were posed, the results looked like what we knew all along: The amount, frequency, severity, and consistency of violence against women are far greater than anything done by women to men—Lorena Bobbitt notwithstanding.⁶⁶

Another problem stems from the question of whom was asked. The studies that found comparable rates of domestic violence asked only one partner about the incident. But studies in which both partners were interviewed separately found large discrepancies between reports from women and from men. The same researchers who found comparable rates have urged that such results be treated with extreme caution, because men underreport severe assaults. (Perhaps it is felt to be equally unmanly to beat up a woman as to be beaten up by one, because “real men” never raise a hand against a woman.)⁶⁷

A third problem results from *when* the informants were asked about domestic violence. The studies that found comparability asked only whether or not any incident occurred in a single year, thus equating a single slap with a reign of domestic terror that may have lasted decades. And, although the research is clear and unequivocal that violence against women increases dramatically after divorce or separation, the research that found comparable results excluded incidents that occurred after separation or divorce. About 76 percent of all assaults take place at that time, though—with a male perpetrator more than 93 percent of the time.⁶⁸

Finally, the research that suggests comparability is all based on the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS), a scale that does not distinguish between offensive and defensive violence, equating a vicious assault with a woman hitting her husband while he is, for instance, assaulting their children. Nor does it take into account the physical differences between women and men, which lead to women being six times more likely to require medical care for injuries sustained in family violence. Nor does it include the nonphysical means by which women are compelled to remain in abusive relationships (income disparities, fears about their children, economic dependency). Nor does it include marital rape or sexual aggression. As one violence researcher asks, “Can you call two people equally aggressive when a woman punches her husband’s chest with no physical harm resulting and a man punches his wife’s face and her nose is bloodied and broken? These get the same scores on the CTS.”⁶⁹

Supporters of claims about battered men, by the way, rarely dispute the numbers of battered women—they claim only that the number of battered men is equivalent. This is curious, because they typically do not advocate more funding for domestic violence but rather *less* funding for women's programs. Such politically disingenuous efforts have earned the disapproval of even the researcher whose work is used most commonly to support their claims.⁷⁰

Of course, some research suggests that women are fully capable of using violence in intimate relationships, but at nowhere near the same rates or severity. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, females experienced over ten times as many incidents of violence by an intimate than men did. On average, women experienced about 575,000 violent victimizations, compared with about 49,000 for men. Perhaps it's a bit higher—perhaps as much as 3–4 percent of all spousal violence is committed by women, according to criminologist Martin Schwartz. About one in eight wives reports having ever hit her husband. And when women are violent, they tend to use the least violent tactics and the most violent ones. Women shove, slap, and kick as often as men, Straus and his colleagues found. But they also use guns almost as often as men do.⁷¹

Domestic violence varies as the balance of power in the relationship shifts. When all the decisions are made by one spouse, rates of spouse abuse—whether committed by the woman or the man—are at their highest levels. Violence against women is most common in those households in which power is concentrated in the hands of the husband. Interestingly, violence against husbands is *also* more common (though much less likely) in homes in which the power is concentrated in the hands of the husband or, in the extremely rare cases, in the hands of the wife. Concentration of power in men's hands leads to higher rates of violence, period—whether against women or against men. Rates of wife abuse and husband abuse both plummet as the relationships become increasingly equal, and there are virtually no cases of wives hitting their husbands when all decisions are shared equally, i.e., when the relationships are fully equal.⁷²

Women and men do not commit acts of violence at the same rate or for the same reasons. Family violence researcher Kersti Yllo argues that men tend to use domestic violence instrumentally, for the specific purpose of striking fear and terror in their wives' hearts, to ensure compliance, obedience, and passive acceptance of the men's rule in the home. Women, by contrast, tend to use violence expressively, to express frustration or immediate anger—or, of course, defensively, to prevent further injury. But rarely is women's violence systematic, purposive, and routine. As two psychologists recently put it:

in heterosexual relationships, battering is primarily something that men do to women, rather than the reverse...[T]here are many battered women who are violent, mostly, but not always, in self-defense. Battered women are living in a culture of violence, and they are part of that culture. Some battered women defend themselves: they hit back, and might even hit or push as often as their husbands do. But they are the ones who are beaten up.⁷³

In the results of a survey that simply adds up all violent acts, women and men might appear to be equally violent. But the nation's hospital emergency rooms, battered women's shelters, and county morgues suggest that such appearances are often deadly deceptive.

Violence against women knows no class, racial, or ethnic bounds. “Educated, successful, sophisticated men—lawyers, doctors, politicians, business executives—beat their wives as regularly and viciously as dock workers.” Yet there are some differences. For example, one of the best predictors of the onset of domestic violence is unemployment. And a few studies have found rates of domestic violence to be higher in African American families than in white families. One study found that black men hit their wives four times as often as white men did and that black women hit their husbands twice as often as white women did. Although subsequent studies have indicated a decrease in violence among black families, the rates are still somewhat higher than for white families.⁷⁴

Among Latinos the evidence is contradictory: One study found significantly less violence in Latino families than in Anglo families, whereas another found a slightly higher rate. These contradictory findings were clarified by separating different groups of Latinos. Kaufman Kantor and colleagues found that Puerto Rican husbands were about twice as likely to hit their wives as were Anglo husbands (20.4 percent to 9.9 percent) and about ten times more likely than Cuban husbands (2.5 percent). In many cases, however, these racial and ethnic differences disappear when social class is taken into account. Sociologist Noel Cazenave examined the same National Family Violence Survey and found that blacks had *lower* rates of wife abuse than whites in three of four income categories—the two highest and the lowest. Higher rates among blacks were reported only by those respondents in the \$6,000–\$11,999 income range (which included 40 percent of all blacks surveyed). Income and residence (urban) were also the variables that explained virtually all the ethnic differences between Latinos and Anglos. The same racial differences in spousal murder can be explained by class: Two-thirds of all spousal murders in New York City took place in the poorest sections of the Bronx and Brooklyn.⁷⁵

Of course, gay men and lesbians can engage in domestic violence as well. A recent informal survey of gay victims of violence in six major cities found that gay men and lesbians were more likely to be victims of domestic violence than of anti-gay hate crimes. One study presented to the Fourth International Family Violence Research Conference found that abusive gay men had profiles similar to those of heterosexual batterers, including low self-esteem and an inability to sustain intimate relationships.⁷⁶

Domestic violence is another way in which men exert power and control over women. And yet, like rape, domestic violence is most likely to occur not when the man feels most powerful, but rather when he feels relatively powerless. Violence is restorative, a means to reclaim the power that he believes is rightfully his. As one sociologist explains, “abusive men are more likely to batter their spouses and children whenever they feel they are losing power or control over their lives.” Another reminds us that “[m]ale physical power over women, or the illusion of power, is nonetheless a minimal compensation for the lack of power over the rest of one’s life.”⁷⁷

CONCLUSION

Violence is epidemic in American society today. The United States is, by far, the most violent industrial nation in the world—despite our nation being the society with the

highest rates of incarceration and the only industrialized nation that uses the death penalty to deter violence. Did I say “despite”? Don’t I mean “because”?

Violence takes an enormous social toll, not just on its victims, but also in the massive costs of maintaining a legal system, prisons, and police forces. And it takes an incalculable psychic toll—an entire nation that has become comfortable living in fear of violence. (Turn on the evening news in any city in America for the nightly parade of murders, fires, parental abuse, and fistfights masquerading as sports.) “To curb crime we do not need to expand repressive state measures, but we do need to reduce gender inequalities,” writes criminologist James Messerschmidt. And assuaging that fear, as criminologist Elizabeth Stanko puts it, “will take more than better outdoor lighting.”⁷⁸

Of course, better lighting is a start. And we have to protect women from a culture of violence that so often targets them. But we also have to protect boys “from a culture of violence that exploits their worst tendencies by reinforcing and amplifying the atavistic values of the masculine mystique.” After all, it is men who are overwhelmingly the victims of violence—just as men are overwhelmingly its perpetrators.⁷⁹

Often, biological explanations are invoked as evasive strategies. “Boys will be boys,” we say, throwing up our hands in helpless resignation. But even if all violence were biologically programmed by testosterone or the evolutionary demands of reproductive success, the epidemic of male violence in America would still beg the political question: Are we going to organize our society so as to maximize this propensity for violence or to minimize it? These are political questions, and they demand political answers—answers that impel us to find alternative, nonviolent routes for men to express themselves as men.

Frankly, I believe that men are better than that, better than biologically programmed violent and rapacious beasts. A colleague recently devised a way to suggest that men can do better. For Rape Awareness Week at his university, he created hundreds of “splash guards” to be distributed in the men’s rooms on campus. (For those who don’t know, a splash guard is the plastic grate that is placed in men’s public urinals to prevent splatter.) He had thousands made up with a simple and hopeful slogan. It says simply: “You hold the power to stop rape in your hand.”

I believe that we can also do far better than we have in reducing violence in our society and in withdrawing our tacit, silent, and thereby complicit support for it. When right-wingers engage in this sort of “male-bashing”—asserting that men are no better than testosterone-crazed violent louts (and that therefore women must leave the workplace and return home to better constrain us)—most men know these slurs to be false. But they are false with a ring of truth to them. Because as long as men remain in their postures of either silent complicity or defensive denial, one might very well get the idea that we do condone men’s violence. “All violent feelings,” wrote the great nineteenth-century British social critic John Ruskin, “produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things.” Until we transform the meaning of masculinity, we will continue to produce that falseness—with continued tragic consequences.