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But what about the men? On masculinity and mass shootings

By

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“But what about the men?” It’s a question that’s been largely avoided by the mainstream within the context of mass shootings.

The recent tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut sparked thousands of conversations across the continent about gun laws, mental illness, and violence. And sadly, we’ve been here before.

We’ve had conversations about access to guns – the victims would still be alive today, after all, if there were no gun. We’ve talked about the need to better address mental illness in North America – about how people need access to services and treatment. With proper support, potential perpetrators could get the help they need before it’s too late. And what about the media? We see violence all the time in [movies](#) [6], video games, and on television. Have we become so desensitized to violence that mass murder has become par for the course? Or, worse, a way to achieve fame in a culture obsessed with celebrity as a goal unto itself?

All these factors are relevant. All of these conversations should be had. But no one is asking what is, for once, the single most important question: What about the men?

In 1984, a 39-year-old man opened fire at an upscale nightclub in Dallas [after a woman rejected his aggressive sexual advances](#) [7]. The man, Abdelkrim Belachheb, went out to his car, retrieved his gun, and returned to the bar, shooting the woman to death. He then reloaded his gun and [killed a total of six more people](#) [7]. Capital punishment quickly became the center of the national conversation. In fact, Belachheb’s crime is most remembered as it led to the passage of House Bill 8 in Texas – the “multiple murder” statute, which made serial killing and mass murder capital crimes.

That same year, James Oliver Huberty, a man whose ‘volatile temper’ and [history of](#) [8] domestic violence is documented, opened fire at a McDonald’s restaurant in California, killing 21 people before being shot dead by a police officer. At the time, this shooting was the “[largest single-day, single-gunman massacre in U.S. history](#) [9].” Shocked, liberal politicians used the incident to lobby for stricter gun laws. Others wanted to know why he wasn’t able to access the mental health services he needed.

In 1992, John T. Miller, angry that his wages were being garnished by court order, “[claimed that child-support payments had ruined his life](#) [10]”. He entered a county office building in Schuyler County, NY, walked up to the child-support unit, and shot and killed four women whose jobs were to collect child-support. Miller had been [ducking childcare payments](#) [11] since 1967.



We all know about the tragic day in 1999 when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold opened fire at Columbine High School, killing 12 of their classmates and teachers. Since, many have claimed the two boys were [psychopaths](#) [12]. In 2004, [an article in Slate](#) [13] commented, based on entries in Harris’ journal that: “These are not the rantings of an angry young man, picked on by jocks until he’s not going to take it anymore. These are the rantings of someone with a messianic-grade *superiority* complex, out to punish the entire human race for its appalling inferiority,” also noting a “lack of remorse or empathy—another distinctive quality of the psychopath.”

Others viewed the Columbine shooting as a ‘revenge killing.’ Some speculated that fame, or infamy, rather, was the driving force behind Harris’ and Klebold’s actions. We began a national conversation about ‘bullying’. ‘Bullying’ as the number one cause for every youth-related problem in North America is another exhausted conversation.

In 2007, 23-year-old Seung-Hui Cho opened fire at Virginia Tech, killing 32 people before taking his own life. Cho’s behaviour at Virginia Tech, prior to the shooting, was said to be ‘troubling’. He had been harassing female students and taking pictures of their legs under desks. Cho had been accused of [stalking](#) [14] [female students](#) [15] on [three](#) [16] separate occasions. Supposedly he left a note “[raging against women and rich kids](#) [17].” After the Virginia Tech massacre, the national conversation turned, once again, to [bullying](#) [18], to mental illness, and to [gun laws](#) [19].

This past year, 24-year-old James Holmes opened fire in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado shooting 71 people. Twelve people died. Holmes had a [history of soliciting prostitutes](#) [20]. One of the women he’d bought sex from claimed that he was aggressive, controlling, and violent with her, [grabbing her hair and holding her wrists and hands](#) [21] so tightly that she was left with bruises. The Aurora shooting [reignited the gun control debate](#) [22]. Some looked to [violence in the media](#) [23] as a factor, while others pointed out that Holmes [was mentally ill](#) [24].

A thousand conversations. None of them about men.

As we are all aware at this point, 27 people were [shot and killed](#) [25] in Newtown, CT on December 14th. The gunman, Adam Lanza, killed his mother first, before driving to Sandy Hook

elementary school, where he proceeded to take the lives of 26 students and employees before killing himself. Some have speculated that Lanza suffered from mental illness. Others want to know why he had access to guns, pointing to his mother, Nancy Lanza, apparently [a gun enthusiast](#) [26].

In the midst of all this horror, we are, understandably, up in arms, demanding change, grieving all the while. But within all this righteous anger, we are very carefully tiptoeing around the common denominator.

In [31 of the school shootings that have taken place since 1999](#) [27], the murderers were all men. [Out of the 62 mass murders which happened over the past 30 years](#) [28], only [one of those shooters was a woman](#). [29]The overwhelming majority of the gunmen were white.

[Jackson Katz](#) [30], an author, filmmaker, social theorist, and anti-sexist activist, whose work has focused on manhood and masculinity, is baffled: “The gender of the perpetrator is the single most important factor, and yet it’s not talked about in that way in most mainstream conversations.”

So liberals have, once again, jumped on the gun control issue (and I won’t deny that guns are an important issue here) and the right have reached for their handguns, arguing that the only way we can protect ourselves is to be armed (as [Ann Coulter tweeted](#) [31], mere hours after the shooting: “more guns, less mass shootings”). Others still, want to talk about [mental illness](#) [32] and the health care crisis in America. It should strike us all as more than a little odd that, amidst all of these conversations, whether it’s the progressives, the right, or the mainstream media – no one is talking about gender.

“Imagine if 61 out of 62 mass killings were done by women? Would that be seen as merely incidental and relegated to the margins of discourse?” Katz asks, “No. It would be the first thing people talked about.”

In the U.S., where health care is privatized, it’s true that many people don’t have adequate access to mental health services. [Racial and ethnic minorities are even less likely to have access to health services](#) [33], as well as, more generally the poor and unemployed. But not only are these mass shootings committed largely by white men, but by middle class white men. If this were primarily an issue of people not having access to mental health services, it would stand to reason that far more mass shootings would be perpetrated by poor minorities, [particularly women of color](#) [34].

But we’re talking white, middle class men -- the members of this society who have the most privilege and the most power. The question everyone should be asking is not: “Where did he get the gun?” or “Why wasn’t he on medication?” But: “What is happening with white men?”

This isn’t to say that men are somehow naturally inclined towards violence. It isn’t reasonable to argue that men are born angry or crazy. Masculinity, on the other hand, is something worth thinking about.

“It’s hidden in plain sight,” Katz adds. “This is about masculinity and it’s about manhood.” Other factors are important too, for example, how masculinity intersects with mental illness or emotional problems or with access to guns. “But we need to be talking about gender front and center.”

Even the gun debate needs to be gendered, Katz points out. “So much of gun culture in the U.S. is about masculinity but it’s unspoken.”

What is it about masculinity that leads to these kinds of tragedies? Katz argues that violence is a gendered way of achieving certain goals. Femininity simply isn't constructed in a way that teaches women to use violence as a means to an end.

“One of the ways we can understand violence is as an external manifestation of internal pain” Katz says. Men, according to societal expectations and norms, are only allowed to experience certain emotions – one of those being anger. Violence and anger are accepted and expected forms of men's emotional expression. “Men are rewarded for achieving certain goals and for establishing of dominance through the use of violence,” Katz says.

Just look at war.

Of course war is yet another factor that is left out of these conversations. The U.S. is a militarized state. America, as a nation, establishes dominance through the use of violence and war is distinctly a male domain. Men wage war and men fight in war. Men run countries that go to war. Men make decisions about whether to continue [drone strikes](#) [35] and about [where to fire missiles](#) [36]. War is a man's game. Winner takes all.

“Militarism is, in a sense, a projection of force and power as the assertion of national manhood,” Katz says. There is no way we could live such a militarized culture and not see that manifested in our understandings of manhood and culture at large.

And what of revenge? We often talk about revenge as a reason behind these kinds of attacks. “Violence is a form of revenge. So often men are enacting violence as a way to take back something they believe as been taken from them,” Katz says.

“Often these shooters are harboring resentment -- they retreat into themselves and then develop these revenge fantasies,” Katz says. “Most of the school shootings over the past couple of decades have been revenge killings.” The innocent victims are just “props in the shooter's theatrical performance of his anger and his resentment,” he says.

When men commit violence, they're fulfilling expectations of their gender.

“Caring, compassion, and empathy aren't innately feminine characteristics. Those are human characteristics,” Katz says. Yet men learn the opposite. They learn to shut up and take it like a man. They also learn that they are entitled to certain things in this world: financial success, access to women, power – when they can't acquire these things, what happens? Well, sometimes, apparently, they seethe. And without any other tools to deal with their anger and resentment, some men resort to violence.

“As a white man, the assumption is that you are the center of the world. Your needs should be met. You should be successful,” Katz says. When that doesn't pan out men will often end up seeing themselves as victims. “This explains the cultural energy on the right in this past generation – so many of these men see themselves as victims of multiculturalism and of feminism,” he adds. “It's undermining the cultural centrality of male authority.” Katz points out that we can see this worldview manifesting itself in the Men's Rights Movement. “They are at the front line making the argument that men are the true victims.” All this isn't to say that all men who feel they are losing grip on their perceived entitlement to power and authority will become perpetrators of mass shootings. But these broader patterns are something to consider.

Are these shooters psychopaths or sociopaths? Maybe. But what's a sociopath? It's a person who

lacks empathy. “Well,” says Katz, “we socialize empathy out of boys all the time.” If we aren’t allowing boys to experience and express vulnerability, pain, and fear because that’s somehow connected to weakness (a feminine quality), then how are they going to be able to relate to the experiences of others? “Sociopathy is the extreme manifestation of the way we socialize boys in our society,” he says.

The question of not only: “What about men?” But “What about white masculinity?” should be, according to Katz, on the front page of every newspaper and on every talk show.

Somehow, people seem more comfortable seeing these shooters as twisted psychopaths. We’re more comfortable blaming objects – guns – than we are asking: “Who’s behind the gun?”

After the Aurora shooting, [Erika Christakis wrote that](#) [37] “The silence around the gendering of violence is as inexplicable as it is indefensible.” And here we are again.

Tags:

[feminism](#) [38] [male privilege](#) [39] [masculinity](#) [40] [mass shootings](#) [41] [Military](#) [42]

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