Men, masculinity and guns: can we break the link?

Ella Page
IANSA Women's Network

Hegemonic (or dominant) masculinity

Masculinities theory considers masculinity as multiple, fluid and context specific. Therefore we generally talk about masculinity in the plural – masculinities. However in exploring issues related to gun violence, we need to first consider the theory of hegemonic (or dominant) masculinity.

This masculinity is a culturally normative ideal of male behaviour and is calculated to guarantee the dominant position of some men over others. While some men are inferior to other men, all men gain from the general subordination of women. Connell has named this effect the 'patriarchal dividend.'[1]

The hegemonic form of masculinity in a given society is not necessarily the most prevalent, but rather it is the most socially endorsed. For example, military personnel may be a minority of men, yet soldierly qualities may be considered the norm for all males. For example, in studies of the armed forces, Barrett found that desirable masculine qualities included "independent, risk taking, aggressive, heterosexual and rational behaviour."[2]

Similarly, Cohn describes admired masculine characteristics as "physical and emotional courage, the ability to endure hardship, and importantly, not to break down emotionally in the face of horror."[3] In practice few men display all the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. Yet it operates as an ideal type, something to which men aspire as a key to respect and authority.

The patriarchal gender system thrives because it engages the cooperation of women as well as men. Thus a majority of women tend to aspire to emphasised femininity and find the qualities of hegemonic masculinity attractive in men.[4]

Individual men can suffer greatly from such rigid expectations of masculinity.[5] A man may struggle to identify with the norm, feel obliged to hide his gentler qualities, and miss out on the rewards of caring, equal and respectful relationships.[6]

Introduction

The majority of men do not own or use guns: gun use must therefore be understood as a choice. A combination of social, economic and political factors combine to create the notion that gun violence is a legitimate option for a man. This paper will examine how constructions of masculinities and femininities work to legitimate the belief that an acceptable and adequate man is one who is willing and able to coerce others by violent means. It will also look at how the association between power and violence in broader social structures serves to perpetuate gun violence. It will argue that a violent masculinity is not inevitable.

Gun violence is gendered

Men comprise the majority of those who use small arms and also the majority of the direct victims of gun violence. In many cultures there is a strong social and cultural association between masculinity and possessing a gun. Gender and age are more powerful predictors of violence than geographical location. [7] Most violent people are men, influenced by exaggerated notions of masculinity, such as the belief that rage is an acceptable response to frustration; that vengeful violence is justified; and that to acknowledge loneliness, pain, vulnerability, or to seek assistance is a sign of inadequacy. [8]

Accurate figures are hard to come by, but in countries that publish statistics it appears that about 80-90% of the people who die by gunshots are male. [9] For example in the USA, males are involved in 80% of the accidental shootings that kill 400 children and injure another 3,000 each year; [10] and 88% of those who commit suicide with a gun are male. [11]

Guns and small arms are almost never manufactured, imported, exported, bought or sold by women. Yet they have a disproportionate and massive impact on women's lives. For every occasion when a gun is fired there are many others when it is used to threaten and intimidate, to achieve a robbery or a rape, or prevent a woman from escaping from an abusive relationship.

Although women are the minority of victims of death by shooting, they nonetheless pay the cost of shooting when they become the main breadwinner and primary care giver in families where a man has been killed, injured or disabled by gun violence. Survivors of gun violence are also the ones left to seek justice for victims from unresponsive police and courts in a culture of impunity.

The deadly problem of gun violence is fundamentally gendered - men, women, boys and girls are differently impacted, differently involved and have different responses. The demand for small arms is directly linked to a cultural association of guns and violence with manhood, so that gun possession is accepted and encouraged as a sign of maturity and status in a man.

There are an estimated 875 million guns in the world. Police, armies and other government agencies that have guns comprise around 25% of the total arsenal. Around 75% of guns are owned by civilians and this includes private security companies, paramilitary forces and other armed groups.* So the private arsenal is three times as large as all the firepower of governments combined. This makes these weapons extremely difficult to regulate and control.

Guns are overwhelmingly owned and used by men, in contexts of both conflict and formal peace. This includes state and non-state actors and structures; people who possess guns for leisure pursuits; and those who feel the need to acquire weapons for self-defence. Criminal activity is also a factor, often involving violence which increases the demand for weapons from victims and perpetrators alike.

* Small Arms Survey (2007), Oxford University Press.

Why do men choose guns?

Research has shown that men who use violence often feel disempowered by wider social and economic factors. When violence, and specifically armed violence, becomes a legitimate means of gaining power within a community, the gun seems to take on a symbolic significance. It has been suggested that one quality of a 'real' man may be the ability to instil fear in others. For this purpose gun possession can be particularly attractive. [12] As such, it can be a strategy to achieve the wealth, respect and security that may otherwise be out of reach.

For example in some circumstances young men with guns have been shown to be able to achieve a level of influence higher than normal for their rank and above that of community elders. In some cases they have violently overthrown the existing social order, achieving domination through extreme violence, as in Sierra Leone (1991-2002) and similar conflicts where 'adolescents and even children, in societies with strong gerontocratic traditions [rule by elders in the community], seize power by force.' [13]

In many cultures 'proving yourself' to be a 'real' man

is associated with a rite of passage or risk taking behaviour involving guns. Research in Brazil, El Salvador and Jamaica demonstrates how gang initiation frequently involves the handling and use of guns as young men affirm an identity and reputation amongst their peer group. [14]

Militarism and masculinity

There is a strong association between violence and power in most societies. The machinery of the state has the monopoly of legitimate violence and control over the military and police forces, which it uses to maintain power. The state locates its power in the possession of armaments and soldiers ready to be deployed in the event of a threat.

Alongside this, power relations between states are often discussed in a language that draws heavily on gender stereotypes. Leaders equate the power of the state with a virile posture in international relations, brandishing their national arsenals to prove their eligibility for the 'big boys club' of powerful nations. [15]

A comment from the Indian Hindu nationalist leader Balasaheb Thackeray to justify India's 1998 nuclear weapon tests encapsulates this equation of weapons and masculinity. He commented, "We had to prove that we are not eunuchs." This statement directly associates weapons with masculinity and demonstrates the perceived need by nation states to prove that they are not emasculated.

When ordinary men see how their governments and political leaders equate power with militarisation, it follows that they may see weapons as assuring security and power for themselves and their communities. [16]

Marginalised men are those most likely to be recruited into poorly paid, dangerous and insecure jobs including in the informal security sector. They are also most likely to end up in armed gangs or be enlisted by the state to fight in wars. [17] Widespread possession (if not ownership) of guns is an inevitable by-product of a particular form of military conscription.

The state security sector (including armed forces, police, and border agencies) and private military and security companies all predominantly employ men who tend to be armed. This increases the number of men who are familiar with using guns and for whom having a weapon is 'normal'. This furthers the penetration of guns and violence into society. In many contexts, men are able to access and use their weapons when they are off-duty and this increases the risk of gun violence in their homes and communities.

'Thwarted' masculinity?

Research has demonstrated that men often feel a sense of disempowerment when they cannot enjoy the same privileges their fathers had, or when social, economic and political factors negatively affect their role as 'head of household' and 'protector' of the family. This has been described as 'thwarted masculinity.' [18] Self esteem suffers and men consider themselves forced into a feminised position. As a result, these men turn to violence to take what they feel they deserve and to reassert their position.

In an example from the USA, Kimmel and Mahle [19] examined a school shooting where a boy took a gun to school to gain attention from his classmates. He assumed that his status would greatly increase as a result. Ultimately he killed 3 students and wounded 5 others in the belief that people would respect him for this action.

Women's empowerment programmes and increased access to decision making can also affect gender relations. Men may find it difficult to 'give up' dominance within the household and accept what they regard as a feminised social position.

Rowland's research on women's empowerment projects in Honduras found that men, confronted with women aspiring to shared decisionmaking, were more likely to respond violently if they had not received gender training. [20]

This pattern of behaviour is also evident in communities where women have achieved economic empowerment. Katz argues that men deal with this challenge to their authority by idealising a physical masculinity, defining a 'real' man as strong and rugged, rather than emphasising the provider role. [21]

Promoting gun violence

Men are the main consumers, and target audience, of violent films, music, and video games and the gun is often the instrument of violence in these media. Violence is often depicted as glamorous and as a passport to a better life replete with available women and consumer goods. [22] Yet the relationship between the media and actual violence is highly contested.

Research shows differing effects of exposure to violence on different men. A number of psychological studies have suggested that exposure to media portrayals of violence act as a 'primer' to actually using violence. Those exposed to media containing violent images were more likely to consider aggressive behaviour. [23]

Advertising often also promotes the idea that an aggressive attitude combined with physical strength is a way of proving your masculinity, and gaining access to women and consumer goods.

By equating violence with a 'better' life, guns are associated with status and become the way to achieve that status. This idea of gun possession and violence as a passport to such a life makes it hard to encourage men to disarm or reject gun violence. [24]

Men involved in gun violence often comment that access to women is an important motivation. These men talk about acquiring women as if they are collecting possessions, as if women are an indicator of social success. Women are assigned a passive position in these relationships.

This can encourage men to own and use guns by reinforcing the symbolism of the gun as a status symbol, a way of accessing power and resources. For example men interviewed in Brazil commented;

'Girls go out with guys who use guns because they want a good life, easy access to money, brand name clothes, feel superior to others … have power over others … if she goes out with a regular working guy her life won't be like that. She likes going out with traffickers for that reason.' [25]

'Sometimes guys will even borrow guns, just to walk around with them, to show off for the girls … They use them because they know that pretty girls will go out with them.' [26]

Gun manufacturers themselves promote the idea of the gun as key to an exciting life. Take, for example the hypermasculine names given to some Spanish firearms, invoking images of mythical heroes and Gods, and fearsome animals.

Examples include: Apache, Astra, Atlas, Búfalo, Campeón, Celta, Cebra, Dragon, Destroyer, Destructor, El Cano, El Cid, Elite, Gloria, Júpiter, Minerva, Omega, Phoenix, Venus, and Victoria.

Clearly gun manufacturers see a sales advantage in promoting their commodities as masculine and dangerous. The names evoke a sense of nostalgia for a more physical age where men were unquestionably in control through violence or intimidation.

They reinforce the idea that men have always been aggressive and violent, that this is part of male nature, and that it cannot and should not change. [27]

Women and female identities

It is important to remember that women are not only victims or passive bystanders in the relationship with guns. [28] Female identities compatible with hegemonic masculinities have their own effectivity. [29] Women's attitudes can sometimes contribute to the powerful cultural conditioning that endorses gun ownership by men. Indeed, some women occupy active (if peripheral) roles in the cycle of violence, facilitating men's gun violence, for instance, through smuggling, transporting and hiding weapons. [30]

A woman who has little access to power or resources may feel she can gain status through association with a man who owns or uses a gun. In communities where respect and leadership is associated with access to means of violence, the gains for women can be great. For example, the 'first ladies' of Brazil's favelas command considerable respect from their communities because of their contact with men with guns.

Women may also feel that their personal security increases, particularly when the state security infrastructure is incapable of protecting them from criminal or paramilitary violence. Some women overtly encourage their men to fight or more subtly support the attitudes and stereotypes promoting gun culture. A common argument used by gun lobbyists is that men need guns to protect their families from armed intruders or attackers, and some women welcome this 'protection'.

Some women are combatants, members of state armies, insurgent groups and armed gangs. However while enlistment can be a source of status, it entails even greater risks and costs for a woman than for a man. An autobiographical account by Kayla Williams who served in the US forces in Iraq demonstrates the contradictory nature of the relationship between women and armed violence.

Although she was able to locate power in the possession of a gun, she was still subjected to sexism as part of the patriarchal militarist machine. [31] Her experience of military life was defined and limited by her sex, she was defined and treated as sister, mother, bitch or slut, [32] but never a colleague. Thus, though wearing uniform, toting a gun and becoming a perpetrator of violence, this militarised women found no escape from inequality and abuse.

There are alternatives

Men and women, boys and girls can, however, act for change in their communities. There is scope for reducing the value placed on possession of a gun.

It is men who ultimately must take the decision to decommission their weapons and rid their lives and relationships of the threat, and often the reality, of violence that gun possession entails. But women have shown in many countries that they are especially motivated to start the process of 'disarming' masculinity in their families and communities, because they have nothing to lose and a great deal to gain by removing guns from their environment.

Women all over the world are increasingly gaining a consciousness that the poverty, inequality, and injustice they experience as women is not only caused by capitalist exploitation, imperialist domination and racist discrimination. It is also an effect of patriarchal gender relations. They are, in growing numbers, seeing through the 'natural' or 'God-given' authority of men, and stepping out of the constraints of conventional roles and behaviours. They are adding their strength to feminist projects.

One of the insights that women's movements bring is that the association of men and masculinity with weapons, at all levels of society from the international to the domestic, is a threat to peace and security, a source of subordination for women, and, what is more, damaging to men themselves. Women's campaigns against gun ownership are therefore growing fast in the space where women's movements and peace movements coincide.

For example Brazilian NGO Viva Rio has recognised the importance of women and girls in influencing men's decisions to own and use guns.

In a 2001 campaign 'Choose gun free! It's your weapon or me' women were empowered to ask their husbands, partners, and boyfriends to give up their weapons. The campaign was a success with its key message that guns are not necessarily a badge of masculine adequacy.

ARMA, NÃO! ELA OU EU.
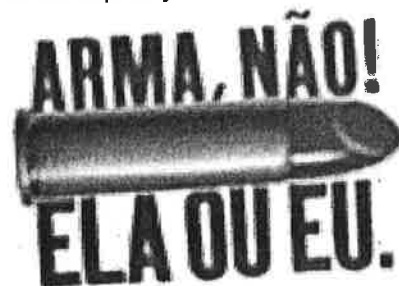
Viva Rio has also engaged men and women in mass action on disarmament. For example tens of thousands of men and women, many of them

organised in victims' support groups, marched in the streets and successfully advocated for tighter gun laws at state and national level in 2001 and 2003. They were also able to counter the gun lobby's claim that guns are necessary for personal security.

Another Brazilian NGO, Instituto Promundo, has also taken an innovative approach to tackling the culture of violence. The organisation's 'Program H' encourages young men to question gender norms and allows them to formulate and perform alternative behaviour. [33] The programme combines educational workshops and peer group support with public campaigns which use 'media, advertising and youth culture to promote gender equality among young men as being 'cool' or 'hip." [34]

For example the campaign has targeted attitudes where violence against women Is excused in the 'heat of the moment' with slogans like 'In the heat of the moment, a real man … cares, listens, accepts.' The campaign openly aims to promote an alternative model of masculinity among men living in deprived and violent communities.

Conclusion

The strong relationship between guns and masculinity is a result of multiple and intersecting social factors. The link between violence and power, the experience of 'thwarted masculinity,' the glamorisation of guns, perception that guns are a passport to a better life, and the attitudes of some women, combine to create an expectation of violence and gun use among men.

Men must be able to recognise the costs of gun culture to their own safety, and to that of their community. Former combatants and gang members are among those who can act most effectively for change, challenging the inevitability of the link between violent masculinities and gun culture.

As the work of Instituto Promundo and Viva Rio shows, a violent masculinity is not inevitable. By challenging gender norms with both men and women, an alternative non violent masculinity can emerge as a positive choice for men.

Endnotes

[1] Connell, RW (1995). Masculinities. Cambridge: Polity. p79.
[2] Barrett, F.J (2001). 'The Organisational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity: the case of the US Navy.' in Whitehead & Barrett eds. The Masculinities Reader. Malden: Mass Polity. p79.
[3] Cohn, C (1999). 'Missions, Men and Masculinities.' International Feminist Journal of Politics. 1.3 p461.
[4] Demetriou, D (2001). 'Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique.' Theory and Society. 30 pp337-361.
[5] Barker, GT (2005) Dying to be Men. Youth, Masculinity and Social Exclusion. Routledge, Oxon p7.
[6] ibid. p8.
[7] Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (2006) Missing Pieces:
Directions for reducing gun violence through the UN process of small arms. p70.
[8] www.apa.org/divisions/Div51/virginiatech.statement.html.
[9] WHO (2002) pp274-275.
[10] Cited in, Jackman, G, et al (2001), 'Seeing is believing: What do boys do when they find a real gun?', Pediatrics, Vol. 107, June, pp1247–1250.
[11] Small Arms Survey (2006), Few Options but the Gun: Angry Young Men. Oxford University Press p178.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ellis, S (1997). Young soldiers and the significance of initiation: some notes from Liberia. Leiden: Afrika-Studiecentrum.
http://www.asc.leidenuniv.nl/pdf p110.
[14] ibid.
[15] Cohn, C, Hill, F and Ruddock, S (2005) The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction. Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission.
[16] Farr, V (2003) 'Gender Awareness in Research and Policy Making'. African Security Review Vol 12 No 1.
[17] Centre For Humanitarian Dialogue (2006) Missing Pieces: Directions for reducing gun violence through the UN process on small arms control. p69.
[18] Dolan, C (2002). Collapsing Masculinities and Weak States – a Case Study of Northern Uganda in Cleaver, F (ed) Masculinities Matter! Men, Gender and Development. London: Zed Books.
[19] Kimmel, M, and Mahler, M (2003) 'Adolescent Masculinity, Homophobia, and Violence: Random School Shootings 1982-2001. American Behavioral Scientist. 46. p10.
[20] Rowlands, J (1997). Questioning Empowerment. Working with women in Honduras. Oxford: Oxfam.
[21] Katz, J (2003) 'Advertising and the Construction of Violent White Masculinity. From Eminen to Clinique for Men. In Dines, G, and McMahon Humez, J, Gender, race, and class in media. Sage.
[22] Small Arms Survey (2006), Few Options but the Gun: Angry Young Men. Oxford University Press. p307.
[23] Bartholow, B et al (2005), 'Interactive effects of life experience and situational cues on aggression: the weapons priming effect in hunters and nonhunters.' Journal of Experimental Social Psychology. Vol. 41, pp48–60.
Berkowitz, Leonard and Anthony LePage 1967. 'Weapons as Aggression-Eliciting Stimuli.' Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. Vol. 7, pp202–07.
[24] Xaba, T 'Masculinity and its Malcontents: the Confrontation Between 'Struggle Masculinity' and 'Post Struggle Masculinity' (1990-1997) in Morrell, R, ed. (2001). Changing Men in Southern Africa. London: Zed Books. p144.
[25] Viva Rio interviews with a focus group of girls aged 14-23 in 2004. Quoted in Amnesty International, IANSA and Oxfam. (2005) The Impact of Guns on Women's Lives. p30.
[26] Galeria, J, interviews with young women aged 14-21, Complexo da Maré, Rio de Janeiro, January 2004. Quoted in Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (2006) Missing Pieces: Directions for reducing gun violence through the UN process on small arms control. p71.
[26] www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/handouts/gender portrayal/masculinity_advertising.cfm
[28] Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (2006) Missing Pieces: Directions for reducing gun violence through the UN process on small arms control.
[29] Chant, S and Gutmann, M (2000). Mainstreaming Men Into Gender and Development: Debates, Reflections and Experiences. London: Oxfam. p42.
[30] Geneva Declaration. (2008) Global Burden of Armed Violence. p128.
[31] Williams, K (2005). Love my Rifle More Than You. Young Female and in the US Army. Phoenix, London. pp13-18.
[32] Cockburn, C (2007) From Where we Stand: War Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis. Zed, London. p223.
[33] www.promundo.org.br.
[34] Barker, GT (2005) Dying to be Men. Youth, Masculinity and Social Exclusion. Routledge, Oxon. p152.

Bibliography

Amnesty International, IANSA and Oxfam. (2005) The Impact of Guns on Women's Lives.

Barker, GT (2005) Dying to be Men. Youth, Masculinity and Social Exclusion. Routledge, Oxon

Barrett FJ (2001) 'The Organisational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity: the case of the US Navy.' in Whitehead & Barrett eds. The Masculinities Reader. Malden: Mass Polity.

Bartholow, B et al (2005) 'Interactive effects of life experience and situational cues on aggression: the weapons priming effect in hunters and nonhunters.' Journal of Experimental Social Psychology. Vol. 41

Berkowitz, L and LePage, A (1967) 'Weapons as Aggression-Eliciting Stimuli.' Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. Vol. 7.

Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (2006) Missing Pieces. Directions for reducing gun violence through the UN process on small arms. Geneva.

Chant, S and Gutmann, M (2000) Mainstreaming Men Into Gender and Development: Debates, Reflections and Experiences. London: Oxfam

Cockburn, C (2007) From Where we Stand. War Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis. Zed, London.

Cohn, C (1999) 'Missions, Men and Masculinities.' International Feminist Journal of Politics. 1. 3

Cohn, C (2003) 'Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defence Intellectuals' Signs 12.4.

Cohn, C, Hill, F and Ruddock, S (2005) The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction. Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission.

Connell, RW (1995) Masculinities. Cambridge: Polity.

Connell RW (2005) 'Change among the gatekeepers: Men, Masculinities, and Gender Equality in the Global Arena'. Signs. 30.3

Demetriou, D (2001) 'Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique.' Theory and Society. 30

Dolan, C (2002) Collapsing Masculinities and Weak States – a Case Study of Northern Uganda in Cleaver, F (ed) Masculinities Matter! Men, Gender and Development. London: Zed Books.

Ellis, S (1997) Young soldiers and the significance of initiation: some notes from Liberia. Leiden: Afrika-Studiecentrum. http:/www.asc.leidenuniv.nl/pdf

Farr, V (2003) 'Gender Awareness in Research and Policy Making'. African Security Review Vol 12 No 1.

Geneva Declaration. (2008) Global Burden of Armed Violence.

Gibson, JW (1995) Warrior Dreams: Paramilitary Culture in Post-Vietnam America. Hill and Wang, New York.

Hartmann, H (1981) 'The Unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: towards a more progressive union' in Sargent, Lydia (ed) The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: A debate on Class and Patriarchy. (London: Pluto Press)

Jackman, G et al (2001) 'Seeing is believing: What do boys do when they find a real gun?', Pediatrics, Vol. 107, June.

Katz, J (2003) 'Advertising and the Construction of Violent White Masculinity. From Eminen to Clinique for Men. In Dines, G McMahon Humez J. Gender, race, and class in media. Sage.

Kimmel, M and Mahler, M (2003) 'Adolescent Masculinity, Homophobia, and Violence, Random School Shootings 1982-2001. American Behavioral Scientist. 46. 10.

Kimmel, M (2005) Masculinity and Gun Violence: The Personal Meets the Political [prepared for a session on Men, Women and Gun Violence at the United Nations, 14 July 2005.]

Rowlands, J (1997) Questioning Empowerment. Working with Women in Honduras. Oxford: Oxfam.

Small Arms Survey (2006) Few Options but the Gun: Angry Young Men, in The Small Arms Survey 2006. Oxford University Press.

Small Arms Survey (2007) The Small Arms Survey. Oxford University Press.

Williams, K (2005) Love my Rifle More Than You. Young Female and in the US Army. Phoenix, London.

Campaign posters by IANSA members