

## Redefining Masculinity: Men as Allies in the Fight against Gender Violence

Nearly one in three (35%) women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence by any perpetrator in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

That statistic does not result from the actions of an individual. You, whoever you are, are not the villain of this story, nor are you the cause of this issue. However, your unwillingness to see this as your problem may be the reason it continues to happen. If this was solely a women's issue, we would see vastly different statistics. Women all over the globe have worked tirelessly to address gender violence for over a century. Although men are sometimes victims, the majority of perpetrators in reported incidents are male, and most victims are female.<sup>2</sup> About 97% of abusers are men who have a female partner.<sup>3</sup>

If we hope to see progress toward ending gender violence, men will have to be part of the solution.

So, how do you become a part of the solution? If you are a man, and you want to end the abuse of women, what can you do? Thankfully, the first step is remarkably accessible to anyone at any time. It is simply to reflect, to build an awareness of your relationship to masculinity and understanding of these issues. The next step will be to live out of that understanding and to share what you know with others.

As a man, you may feel attacked when you hear that men are the problem; you may feel shamed by terms like "toxic masculinity." If that is the case, forget those terms for now. Don't

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization (WHO), Human Reproduction Programme (HRP), "Violence Against Women," *WHO*, 2019, <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/vaw-evidence-brief/en/>.

<sup>2</sup> Office for Prevention of Domestic Violence, "Understanding Domestic Abusers," *New York State*, Accessed November 4, 2020, <https://opdv.ny.gov/professionals/abusers/genderandipv.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Office for Prevention of Domestic Violence, "Understanding Domestic Abusers."

let those barriers stop you from joining this conversation. If you do, you deny yourself the chance to be a part of creating a world where everyone is safe.

Consider that perhaps this self-reflection is not meant to shame you, that maybe your engagement is not only for the benefit of others but also for yourself. Our understanding of masculinity is sculpted by hundreds of years of patriarchal culture and social conditioning.<sup>4</sup> If you value your individuality and freedom to choose the kind of person you are, you must start by addressing the ways culture has shaped your self-image without your conscious consent. Then, you get to choose which of these traits align with your values and which are harmful to yourself and others.

How did we get here? Why do individuals commit these acts, and why has this grown into such a widespread problem? The World Health Organization (WHO) cites the following as predicting factors for the perpetration of sexual violence: beliefs in family honor and sexual purity, ideologies of male sexual entitlement, and weak legal sanctions for sexual violence.<sup>5</sup> Beliefs, ideas, and policies are all components of culture. We will first explore the role of beliefs and ideas.

From the moment a mother slips a pair of blue socks onto her newborn baby boy's feet, she is handing down cultural beliefs about gender to her son. In this case, it is an arbitrary linking of the color blue to maleness, but later on, her son will inherit some cultural links that are far more dangerous. He will learn that our culture links sex and violence.<sup>6</sup> He will learn that

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<sup>4</sup> Noam Shpancer, "When Men Attack: Why (and Which) Men Sexually Assault Women," *Psychology Today*, February 20, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/insight-therapy/201902/when-men-attack-why-and-which-men-sexually-assault-women>.

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization (WHO), Human Reproduction Programme (HRP), "Violence Against Women."

<sup>6</sup> Shpancer, "When Men Attack: Why (and Which) Men Sexually Assault Women."

our culture often promotes violence because it is linked to being a “real man.” If he chooses to accept these culturally transmitted ideas, he will begin to act on them. He may begin to hold rape-supportive beliefs, such as: “women say 'no' when they mean 'yes'; women who dress provocatively, drink alcohol, or go someplace alone with a man are asking to be raped; women can resist a rape if they try; women often falsely accuse men of rape.”<sup>7</sup> Research shows that those who endorse these statements are more likely to sexually abuse women. In simpler terms, traditional American culture and cultures all over the world promote the idea that men are superior to women and women are subordinate to men.

There are real consequences when members of a culture enforce these beliefs. Deeply held, core beliefs are the primary factor for policymakers’ decisions.<sup>8</sup> Thus, if those who make the policies under which our society functions believe in the inferiority of women, their policies will reflect that belief, and women will suffer the consequences. Many such policies are in effect today.<sup>9</sup> Policy like this only encourages men further to exercise their power over women.

Daily behaviors of individuals are also a real consequence. More subtle adherence to these ideas, such as laughing at a joke that demeans women or constantly interrupting a woman in conversation, keeps the culture of male dominance alive by allowing it to continue unchecked. More severe action based on these beliefs, like discriminating against a female employee or forcing sexual contact, directly harms women while also upholding cultural power

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<sup>7</sup> Shpancer, “When Men Attack: Why (and Which) Men Sexually Assault Women.”

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Ripberger et al. “Cultural Theory and the Measurement of Deep Core Beliefs Within the Advocacy Coalition Framework,” *Policy Studies Journal* 42, no. 4 (2014): 509-527, <https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12074>.

<sup>9</sup> Sunny Frothingham and Shilpa Phadke, “100 Days, 100 Ways the Trump Administration Is Harming Women and Families,” *Center for American Progress*, April 25, 2017, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2017/04/25/430969/100-days-100-ways-trump-administration-harming-women-families/>.

dynamics. Violence is only one disturbing outcome. Men often abuse women psychologically, which can include behaviors like stalking a woman, demeaning her, telling her she is crazy, and denying her access to social support or financial resources.<sup>10</sup> All of these behaviors result in major mental and physical health problems for women.

You and the men around you have the power to incrementally change the culture. My hope for you is that you might begin to examine with grace and empathy the ways in which you have contributed to a culture of abuse. How can you make simple changes that could have significant impact? In your workplace, your home, and your day-to-day interactions, how can you act from the belief that men and women are equally deserving of respect, access, and safety? Consider the ways that your words or actions may be demeaning toward women. Think about how you talk to women. Maybe you make a comment about a female coworker's appearance. Ask yourself if you would make a similar comment about a male coworker. If not, then your comment may contribute to the objectification of women, and this will affect the people around you. When you are in a meeting, consider the amount of time men lead the discussion and control decision-making. Are women getting the same chance to lead and collaborate? Is there even a woman present?

If you are willing to empathetically engage with questions like these, you accept the life-giving opportunity to create a culture in which masculinity is no longer linked with male domination and women's subordination. You accept the opportunity to ally with women in pursuit of safety, justice, and equity.

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<sup>10</sup> National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), "Facts about Domestic Violence and Psychological Abuse," *NCADV*, 2015, <https://ncadv.org/statistics>.

If you are not sure where to start, show your solidarity through Memphis Area Women's annual Council's Walk a Mile in Her Shoes event. To show their solidarity with women, men in our community will march in women's high heels to raise awareness for the issues of gender violence and discrimination. Participation in this event is a great way to begin your journey.

You have the power to choose how masculinity shapes your identity. Please choose with care. We hope to see you soon.

**Resources:**

- Ted Talk: Violence Against Women—It's a Men's Issue by Jackson Katz  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/jackson\\_katz\\_violence\\_against\\_women\\_it\\_s\\_a\\_men\\_s\\_issue](https://www.ted.com/talks/jackson_katz_violence_against_women_it_s_a_men_s_issue)
- Why Men Attack by Noam Schpancer, Psychology Today  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/insight-therapy/201902/when-men-attack-why-and-which-men-sexually-assault-women>
- Male Power, Privilege Drive Most Abusers by Emilie Munson, AP News  
<https://apnews.com/article/01b10be8ec494f3480ab739ba3a70fc4>
- Men Can Stop Rape <https://mcsr.org/>; Downloadable handouts, including What Young Men Can Do, What Is Healthy Masculinity?, and Rape as a Men's Issue  
<https://mcsr.org/download-handouts>
- Bystander Basics by No More Project <https://nomore.org/bystander-basics/>
- The Culture of Masculinity and its Negative Impacts on Men, PBS  
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/the-culture-of-masculinity-and-its-negative-impacts-on-men>