



Joanna Lewis

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## The Misogyny paradox: the more it spreads, the less we can talk about it

*Professor Joanna Lewis, historian, writer and, feminist makes the case for bringing misogyny centre stage in strategies to combat rising levels of gender-based violence and a feminist 'backlash'.*

*This blog is part of a wider series on Misogyny. The full selection of articles can be found [here](#).*

I vividly remember the moment I first heard the word misogyny. I was in my second year at university, sitting in a classroom. The course was on politics, and there was one week devoted to women, run by one of the very few women lecturers I had at either Bath or Cambridge University. I grew up in a rural village at a time when popular culture caricatured a feminist as a woman in men's clothing, who had 'let herself go'. I never knew such a word existed.

When I was told there was a phenomenon with a name, and what it meant, was a light-bulb moment. Suddenly, so much of my life to that date made sense; my mother's life and thwarted ambitions; my grandmother's inner suffering; why I felt I had to leave South Wales after my experience in sixth form. My sense of the world, and much in between, all fell into place. That was a sad but salutary day.

A dictionary-type definition will tell you that misogyny begins as an irrational fear and dislike of women. But this reading ignores the range of its emotional spectrum. It's a full shopping bag from the aisle of negativity. You can take your pick: a lack of empathy, coldness, uncomfortableness, resentment, disgust, hate. It can result in the differential treatment of women and girls in society, politics, education, and the economic sphere. -

Misogyny in practice is connected to gender based hurt and violence: behaviours which include control, subjugation, oppression, cruelty, abuse, violation, rape, molestation, and brutality. Actions

that reduce certain human beings to something far less than their intrinsic ability, humanity, and worth because of their gender.

I strongly believe that for Women, Peace and Security to move forward, whether as a legal framework, set of policies, norms, or an aspiration for a kinder, safer world, sustainable planet, free from violence against women and girls, then we need to tease out what is pushing back against this agenda.

Because we have the data. We have the protocols. We have the knowledge from experience. We hold the wisdom of what reduces violence against women and girls. But it is not being put into practice. It is being dismantled and shouted down.

Misogyny is not a new problem. Misogyny is often called the oldest prejudice in the world. Or the most stubborn and irrational of ideologies. Or one of the most damaging examples of group hatred. Virtually no culture, group, period of history, nor geographical location has been free of it, nor have women either.

However, misogyny is currently reinventing itself and enjoying a deadly resurgence. [“Misogyny has never let progress get in its way,” wrote Jack Holland.](#)

As a historian, I see at least three reasons for this rebirth of bigotry. First, it's a 'mankind' phenomenon that has been ever-present throughout evolution. Even if the rationale for patriarchy recedes, misogyny remains. The roles and identity of men get challenged when the basic means of human existence shift, and there is competition for new and old resources. Aggression grows; frustration grows. It is not just women who bear the brunt. But if they do, a handy theory that justifies control and punishment is misogyny.

Secondly, motive. Today's poly-crisis of global conflict, post-industrial collapse, mega-inequalities, population shifts, social change, and state collapse are producing striking patterns of anger, feelings of exclusion, and powerlessness. Tensions between groups, inside communities, and within families are on the rise. These can be played out on (or even blamed on) vulnerable groups. Women and girls often, though not exclusively, are scapegoated for wider ills.

And thirdly, means. Technology, and in particular social media and the internet. Widely shared discourses of gender-based hate and freely available degrading images of women and girls are fuelling a globalised culture of misogyny. Meanwhile, tech companies refuse to take responsibility for the consequences of unregulated misogynistic online content. Misogyny is being socialised, normalised, and sexualised like never before. Hate is the new lingua franca online.

Why don't we talk about it more? Ironically, I think it is because of its spread, the rapidity of these changes, and deeper entanglements.

The legacy of the 'culture wars', the legacy of modern empires, and the impact of the end of the Cold War have foreshortened historical memories. As a result, past epochs, and previous patterns

of misogyny get overlooked. Global history has become the long twentieth century. There is a tendency to view pre-industrial societies or rurality as non-extractive and eco-friendly, one assumption being that misogyny didn't exist. An intersectional approach to violence against women and girls rightly reveals how issues such as class, ethnicity, and region make certain groups more vulnerable and how a more systemic approach to injustice is required. But to ignore cultures of misogyny within those categories of analysis ignores basic truths and patterns. To ignore how religious belief systems can contribute is myopic.

Worse still is the backlash against feminism, partly a consequence of the success of misogyny. Politics has become its little helper. On the right globally, women are being blamed for the plight of men, for making men mad, angry, and feeling inadequate; for taking their jobs. Only the assertion of traditional roles, women as subservient, will restore the natural order, so it goes. On the global left, women's rights are 'Western rights' and must be resisted. Meanwhile, the liberal middle will often sacrifice women's rights for almost any other gain, whether political, community sensitivity points, or not having to do anything.

*Photo credit: Pexels*

### About the author



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Professor Joanna Lewis is the Director of the Centre for Women, Peace and Security. She is also Associate Professor in the Department of International History at LSE. She is a historian of Britain in Africa, and Africa in Britain, covering the precolonial to the contemporary. She is author of *Women of the Somali Diaspora: refugees, resilience and rebuilding after conflict* (2021) and *Empire of Sentiment* (2018).

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