

What Connects Rape in War, Domestic Violence and Sexual Harassment? Patriarchy.

[The Guardian](#)

Suzanne Moore

Without an analysis of the patriarchy, we will remain powerless to change the abuse of women that is present in varying degrees everywhere.



In Raqqa, the women of the YPJ have vanquished the rapists of Isis. Photograph: Chris Huby/Le Pictorium/Barcroft

Late at night I gaze upon the faces of [the women of the YPJ](#), the Kurdish all-female military organisation, [as they unfurl flags in Raqqa](#). Isis is not entirely gone. Everything is still complicated. But for a moment these women have won. They vanquished the rapists. They have confronted our worst nightmares. They know what they are doing. In interviews these young women tell us that rape is a planned way to destroy a culture and that this is what Isis fighters were doing to the Yazidis. They tell us they scream with happiness when they go into battle because they know that, according to the Isis interpretation of Islam, to be killed by a woman means a fighter won't go to heaven.

[Watch, if you can bear it](#), the accounts of the [Rohingya women who have been raped in Myanmar](#). Again, rape is being used systematically to destroy a culture. It was used in the Balkans, too. It has always been used.

Men rape old women, and they rape tiny girls in front of their mothers. In some cases, they rape with guns and metal bars. Dying women are raped. This is about power, not sex.



We are warned not to generalise. We must always be specific about male violence. “Not all men”, we must say, in case someone gets upset. We must not connect the horrendous violence of war zones with anything nearer our own safe spaces, our homes and gardens. And, as well as that, we must not connect what happens in UK homes – two women murdered a week – to our own lives, because then we might realise that we cannot fully live in these conditions.

To be paralysed by the fear of what men do would shrink our world. Which, of course, is precisely what has been revealed by all the [#MeToo accounts of assault and harassment](#) that have been shared on social media, accounts that illustrate the myriad ways women live smaller lives in anticipation of male violence. It breaks my heart to see it is the same, and perhaps even worse, for younger women today. I would quite like a day off from all this, but so much fiction, TV, so many films, are about the murder of women. A real-life murderer of a woman – Bertrand Cantat, the musician who beat his girlfriend Marie Trintignant to death – [is the cover star of a French magazine this week](#). The publishers say perhaps this was bad timing. Yet this is just one one-off occurrence, of course. It has no connection, we are told, to anything else.

I must not join the dots. God forbid I become “reductive” about male violence. No, I must be sophisticated and unknowing. I must play to the better angels: men who are nice. We have to get them on side.

Well no. Get real. This strategy has failed. Without an analysis of the “p” word, patriarchy, we remain powerless to change it. Either a) men are just naturally aggressive because of testosterone, women are passive breeders, and this is biologically determined, or b) there is a power structure in play here that can be challenged.

I am going with b) because I am an optimist. The concept of patriarchy is overarching and universalising, it is trans-historical and nowhere near cross-cultural enough. You cannot talk of women as a class, say the materialists, the post-structuralists, the anti-feminists. Be more specific about the gradations of difference, and talk of intersectionality. Talk of class and race. Yes, do, but we also have to understand and recognise that Marx's writing never could and never will quite explain the subjugation of women.

With no understanding of patriarchy, we are stuck. It is all relative but we can roughly agree some of the features of a patriarchal society and place ourselves on a spectrum from Iceland to Yemen ([by some measures the best and worst countries for women to live in](#)). Those features are: a lack of formal or state power (women are not represented in government); women doing all the housework and childcare; negative treatment of female sexuality; women being more likely to face abuse; or being shown in media and popular culture in very limited ways. Then we can see that some societies are more patriarchal than others. The shock is that so-called advanced societies choose patriarchy: look at the election of Donald Trump.

It is much easier and more reassuring then, not to have a universalising theory about male violence and power and female collusion, because most women are not separatists. It is easier to be protected by the niceness of the nice men. It is easier to write crap about sex being a bargaining chip. It is easier to run to the big daddies who employ the scab women who minimise sexual assault and wilfully misunderstand consent. It is easier and more profitable to be a misogynist than not. It is easiest of all not to think at all.

To live even with all my privilege in a relatively free and rich culture is to pretend that what happens in front of my eyes, does not, in fact, happen; and that what happens to other women in other parts of the world, or indeed over the road, is not part of a system. Is the answer that, because acknowledging it is horrible, let's not?

We can comfort ourselves instead with the idea that patriarchy is something old-style feminists talked about long, long ago and we all know much better now.

I hear that some people are now "woke", and I find it somehow chilling that the problems we face aren't being named more specifically. Until they can be, we are not woke, we are in the state that happens when pain shuts down a body completely. A coma.