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PROTECTORS OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY: AN ANALYSIS OF GUN  
LEGISLATION AND MASCULINITY

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May 12, 2017

In the year of 2016, 15,050 people died at the hands of firearms. In the same year there were 385 mass shootings (Mass Shootings-2016). With so much gun violence and tragedy crossing our news screens, many citizens have become increasingly concerned over the issue of gun violence in the country. Others either deny the problem exists, or claim that their gun ownership is not a part of the problem. In wake of this, gun regulation has become an evermore-contentious debate. Much of the nation is growing frustrated by the lack of governmental intervention as the violence continues. What many people ignore is that there is an underlying reason for our country's inability to pass stricter gun regulations: the threat it poses to hegemonic masculinity.

Guns have long been a symbol of masculinity. Guns represent power, violence, domination, and lack of emotion. The symbolic representation even goes a step further by taking on the shape of a phallus. Guns are used for protection, dominance, hunting, target shooting, killing, and war--- all largely associated with masculinity. It is logical then, that there is a large gender gap in gun ownership, with 37% of men compared to 12% of women (Section 3: Gun Ownership, 2013) owning guns. Men are predominantly the gun owners, gun users, and gun supporters in the United States. Men favor protecting gun rights, unlike women who prefer controlling gun ownership (In Gun Control, 2013). This difference is in part due to the different ways women and men are raised to view their gender in relation to guns. Guns represent violence, domination, and protection to both, but the connotations are different. Men are celebrated for domination and encouraged to be more violent than women. They are also the protectors of their family, community, and nation, making guns an important tool. For most women, guns signify danger, discord, and even victimization. Women are rarely seen as the protectors of their own

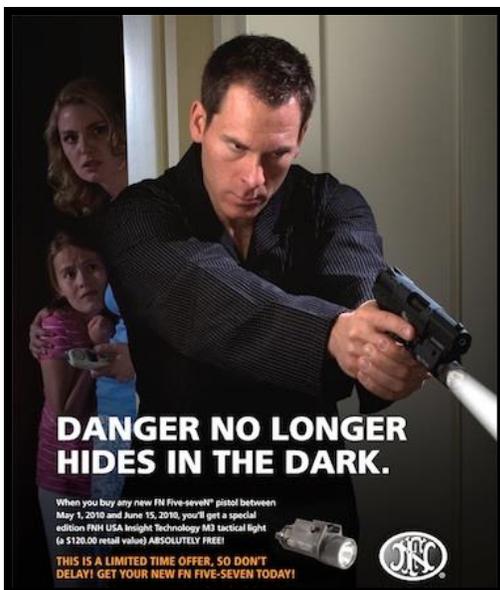
physical safety, let alone the safety of others, so the use of guns for protection is not as relevant as it is to men. Men, therefore, have more to lose when it comes to gun regulation laws- part of their masculinity.

Research supports that guns are used to uphold hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is a term coined by sociologist R.W. Connell to describe the prevailing construct of masculinity as a social class that dominates women. The ideal hegemonic man is wealthy, physically strong, heterosexual, middle-aged, educated, unemotional, independent, and white (Connell, 2005). Each of these characteristics allows a man to rise higher in societal status and therefore privilege, and practice domination of others. One inherent downside of hegemonic masculinity is that it is unattainable. It is an ideal to constantly strive for, rather than an achievable designation. The nature of hegemonic masculinity also requires the domination of men by other men in order to rise in the hierarchy; therefore, it naturally is harmful to men as a group. Despite the downsides of hegemonic masculinity, men still engage in the constant struggle to rise higher as a hegemonic man. There are prizes of privilege and power for every bit closer men get to the standard of masculinity. Men who are engaged in this constant struggle to reach the peak of their masculinity may find owning a gun a helpful way to increase their esteem.

A set of research studies conducted by Rob Willer demonstrated that men adopt stereotypical behavior to reinforce their masculinity. The research tested how much men would endorse stereotypes for their gender after their masculinity had been threatened or not (by scoring on the “feminine” or “masculine” side on a fake gender identity test). The results showed a tendency to overcompensate their masculinity when they scored on the feminine side of the test (Willer, 2013). Men whose identities were threatened engaged in

more stereotypically masculine behaviors and attitudes. Examples from the study include greater support for war and interest in buying a masculine car. When men feel that their masculinity is under attack (as all men inherently feel at times), they rely on stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity to regain their confidence as a person of status. One powerful and simple way to reduce the anxiety of being emasculated and losing control is by owning a gun.

Guns are an easy way to symbolize hegemonic masculinity. In a 2012 study, researcher Angela Stroud conducted an analysis of interviews with men who had concealed weapon licenses. The research revealed three similar themes of their reasoning for having concealed weapons. Stroud identifies two themes as directly relating to a performance of masculinity: “the family defender” and “the aging male body.” The family defender is a role that places men as the head of the family and the protector of women and children. The participants in the study most commonly used this reasoning for their gun ownership. Men are seen as the physical protectors of their families, and



guns are marketed as the way to carry out this task. In fact, protection is now the top reason for gun ownership, with 48% of gun owners citing protection as their main reason (Why Own a Gun, 2013). Stroud notes that none of the men she interviewed ever actually used their guns for protection and were away from their family often, making their wives a more sensible candidate for the family defender. Yet

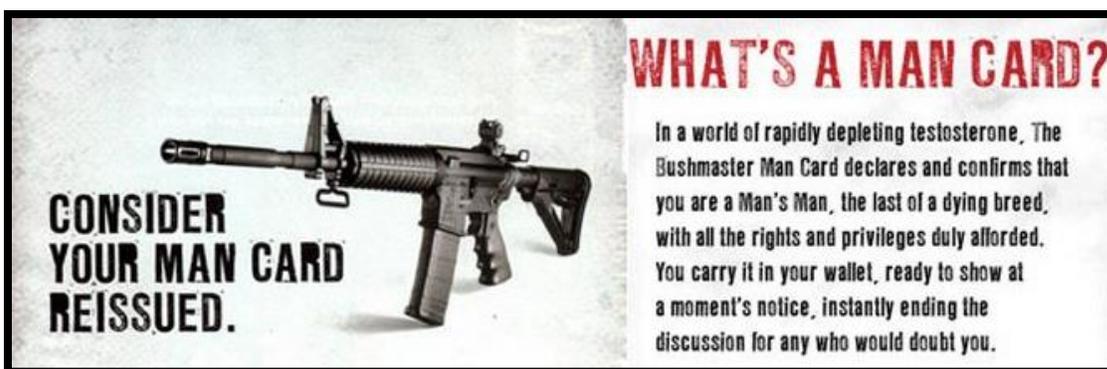
guns are vital for these men to identify as good husbands, good fathers, and good masculine men. This strong connection between guns and masculine identity as protectors contributes to our inability to pass gun control laws. Pro-gun politicians and lobbyists perpetuate this notion in order to keep constituents from regulating their very profitable industry. Even Presidential Candidate Donald Trump has said he has a concealed weapon license for protection. If men continue to carry this burden of the protector role, and guns continue to be the tool for upholding that, gun regulation will unlikely pass into law.

There remains a second convincing use of gun ownership to upholding masculinity. The second theme Stroud found in her research was, “the aging male body” (Stroud, 2012). A central characteristic of hegemonic masculinity is physical strength and domination. Men are never to be victims, so if they are disabled in some way, or lacking physical strength, guns become the “great equalizer.” The connection between guns and upholding masculinity is clear in the media as well, in which guns are predominantly in the hands of male actors. The media perpetuates a male fantasy of being the hero who uses guns to take down the “bad guys” who also have guns. For any man who feels they are not in peak physical shape, guns can help bolster their confidence in their ability to be the protector, dominator, and avoid being the victim. Since most men will feel physically inadequate at some point in their lives, they are more likely to oppose gun regulations for fear that they will not have access to the increased physical power that guns provide.

The issue of masculinity and guns is concerning due to the devastating consequences of gun violence in our country and across the world. Guns are being used to uphold a system of inequality and male dominance, resulting in violence instead of

providing more safety for our citizens. Despite the 55% of our nation who believe laws regarding the sale of firearms should be made stricter, our policies do not reflect this. There is a large amount of political backlash against efforts to place more restrictions on guns (Guns, 2016). In fact, in response to the unwillingness of Congress to pass gun reformation, President Obama issued an Executive Order in January 2016 to reduce gun violence (Office of the Press Secretary, 2016). To use an Executive Order in this way shows how desperate the President was to take political action on the issue. The threat to masculinity posed by gun regulation is a tremendous roadblock to the passing of such laws.

Masculinity plays into this political battle from several different angles. First, gun lobbies like the National Rifle Association use masculinity to bolster support for pro-gun attitudes. In his book, *Gun Crusaders: The NRA's Culture War*, Scott Melzer analyses how the NRA uses masculinity to bolster gun support and gun ownership. Melzer argues that by promoting the values of a type of masculinity he calls, "frontier masculinity" which include self-reliance, rugged individualism, and a strong work ethic, the NRA bolsters support to their cause. The NRA and other gun lobbies use marketing and rhetoric to perpetuate the connection between guns and masculinity to ensure politicians and voters do not regulate their very profitable industry.



Since lobby groups and the media have shaped the cultural connection between guns and masculinity, voters and politicians behave accordingly. In a poll, 26% voters would only vote for a candidate with same gun views. Since conforming to hegemonic masculinity is what gives men privilege and power, gun regulation poses a great threat to their status in society. Consider the finding that men who receive post secondary education support gun restrictions at much higher rates than those who receive high school degrees (Race, Education, Gender Differences, 2015). This gap is of note because education (and economic standing) is a factor of hegemonic masculinity and social status. Men who have less education have a lower status in society and are more likely to be compensating for a threat to their masculinity by opposing gun regulations. The more men who feel a threat to their masculinity, the more opposition to gun regulation will result.

When it comes to differences in support for gun regulations between men and women, two interesting trends arise. Women support more restrictions in every category except: “Laws to prevent mentally ill people from purchasing guns” and “More teachers and officials with guns in schools” (In Gun Control Debate, 2013). Mental illness is tied in with masculinity because men don’t seek mental health care as much as women due to social stigma. In addition, hegemonic masculinity is a destructive force when it comes to the wellbeing of men, so it makes sense that the combination of the two would be prevalent in mass shooters. While there is research supporting the connection between mental illness and mass shootings, it is largely ignored that the most unifying demographic of mass shooters is their gender. Women make up a miniscule two percent of mass shooters. If mental illness were the only factor, the gender of mass shooters

would be more evenly split. Still, men refuse to acknowledge the connection. It seems as though, by focusing on the issue of mental illness, men are attempting to split the link between the two forces. If all we need to do is prevent mentally ill people from owning guns, they do not have to deal with the threat to their own masculinity. It's a way of passing off the issue and derailing the conversation.

A third contributing factor in the inability to pass stricter gun regulations is a simple one: the lack of women's representation in politics. While women make up about 51% of the population, they hold only 18% of political offices. Women are not motivated to support guns by any perceived threat to their gender identity, and typically are more in favor of gun regulation. The lack of parity in our government makes it much more difficult to pass gun regulation. The 88% of men who are in political office are simply more threatened by the proposed policies and more likely to oppose stricter gun regulation. If progress is to be made, more women need to be elected to political offices.

As we are currently in the midst of an election season, it is helpful to turn to rhetoric of the presidential candidates on the issue of gun control to support this theory. One theme that resounds across the parties is the mental illness argument discussed earlier in this paper. Candidates, no matter their political party affiliation, speak about keeping guns out of the hands of the "mentally ill" or of addressing the mental health care issue in our country. Take for instance the following quote from Presidential Candidate Bernie Sanders:

We need strong sensible gun control, and I will support it. But some people think it's going to solve all of our problems, and it's not. You know what, we have a crisis in the capability of addressing mental health illness

in this country. When people are hurting and are prepared to do something terrible, we need to do something immediately.

While Candidate Sanders has a valid point, even a very progressive liberal candidate is not tapping into the greater issue at hand, our cultures toxic masculinity crisis. All of the candidates have referenced the issue of mental illness and gun violence in their rhetoric at some point. Presidential Candidate Donald Trump for instance commented, “No matter what you do, guns, no guns, it doesn't matter. You have people that are mentally ill. And they're going to come through the cracks. And they're going to do things that people will not even believe are possible.” Here you can see that Candidate Trump is very deliberately separating the issue of gun control from gun violence by citing mental illness as the cause. Candidate Sanders argues in favor of gun control, yet says it’s not enough but that the mental health care system needs to be improved. Candidate Trump argues that mental illness is the cause of gun violence and that gun control will never stop those people from acting violently, therefore gun control is not useful. While Sanders and Trump have different stances on gun control, both are using mental illness to distance mass shooters from the mainstream population. By doing so, they allow “regular” gun owners to bolster their support of guns since they are not part of the problem.

Another theme that pervades the anti-gun regulation rhetoric of candidates is protection. Candidates use the theme of protection of family and of the country commonly when talking about gun rights. Presidential Candidate Ted Cruz noted, "The Second Amendment to the Constitution [...] is a Constitutional right to protect your children, your family, your home, our lives, and to serve as the ultimate check against governmental tyranny--for the protection of liberty." Here Candidate Cruz alludes to the

role of family defender defined in Stroud's research (Stroud, 2012). It's reasonable to conclude Cruz intends this comment for male citizens, due to the stereotypes of masculinity. Similarly, the trope of "American hero" emerges in rhetoric. Cruz includes at the end of his comment a reference to the use of guns to protect freedom against tyranny. Former Presidential Candidate Ben Carson has said, "[The Second Amendment] is there in case of an invasion by a foreign power, the people will be able to aid the military, and also, if we have a time when we have the wrong people in office and they want to dominate the people, the people will be able to defend themselves." This is an interesting statement to analyze since it taps into the fear of being dominated. As discussed earlier, men are never supposed to be dominated or victimized. Here, Carson uses that fear to explain why the right to gun ownership is important: if men are being dominated by the government, they can use guns to restore order. Ironically, many minority groups currently face oppression and domination by the current patriarchal system and men are arguably at least risk of being oppressed or dominated by the government.

The findings that America's gun obsession and gun violence problem are connected to upholding masculinity are important if we are to make progress with the issue. Most citizens can agree that we need to work towards a safer country. They are divided, however, by the desire for more guns to ensure this safety, or fewer guns to reach the same ends. We continue to have a difficult time acknowledging the connection between gun violence and the destructive forces of hegemonic masculinity. If men were to acknowledge this, it would be the first brick to fall, and that is a dangerous threat. Men are not ready to give up their power and privilege. In order to move forward, men must

see that hegemonic masculinity hurts them as well as women. If men were to shift their attitudes to view hegemonic masculinity as a damaging force, instead of their source of “power,” they would begin to question every system our society has constructed. The issue of gun regulation could be the first issue that engages men in the deconstruction of patriarchy. These are lofty goals, however. In order for the debate over gun regulation to progress, and the violence to end, citizens need to be educated on hegemonic masculinity and the issues at hand. In order to view the issue of safety in our country more clearly and productively, it is crucial to start deconstructing hegemonic masculinity.

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