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Men and Gender Justice

Sunder John Boopalan¹

When Donald Trump was caught on tape saying, “Grab them by the p****,” a lot of well-meaning men – me included—condemned such talk. Among them that condemned such violent speech were also athletes who argued that talk, which demeaned women and glorified a violent masculinity, was not part of “locker room talk.” I, however, began to reminisce – not fondly – on some of the conversations that I have had with other men in both homogeneous and mixed settings. I recalled several sexually lewd conversations that occurred not only in locker rooms but also in far more open public spaces. While on the one hand, one could make the claim that I hung around with the “wrong” men, I believe, on the other hand, that gendered violence is far deeper and wider than one would like to admit.

Socially conditioned into male privilege, men are often blinded by that very privilege. This causes a certain metaphorical scotoma and scaling of their eyes and hearts. These conditioned states often prevent men from acknowledging their privilege and further contribute to a feigned ignorance of their complicity in gendered social violence.

This essay employs the category of “reformation” to undertake an overhaul of men and masculinity, examine their complicity in gender-based violence, and offer some possibilities for the role of men in gender justice. In conversation with recent academic work on masculinity,² the approach will be reflective, anecdotal, and meant primarily for male readers, particularly those that were/are schooled into hetero-normative ways of thinking and doing often without ever consciously realizing that this is the case.

I am a heterosexual male; born in India; thirty-five years old at the time of this writing in 2017; husband; father; and theologian. Theological education has made me much more self- and other-aware. It is too soon to make a claim on my own behalf that I am now a better man. Nevertheless, I have come to see toxic masculinity for what it is and embrace the need to reform such socially conditioned violence. The role of men in gender justice first involves an act of freeing and reforming oneself from violent masculinity. This self-freeing and self-reformation are necessary conditions for gender justice. Whether they will also be sufficient conditions for the same, only time will tell.

As a child, my mother shared with my siblings and me her experiences with violent masculinity. In public transport (usually buses) in India women are often groped and sexually harassed. Such traumatic experiences are so common that they often become the backdrop of everyday life for girls and women. When I was an undergraduate, many of my female friends shared similar experiences of violence. I soon did the math and what I discovered to be true then continues to be true today. Every third woman I personally know has been sexually harassed. I began to gradually but clearly realize the depth of gender

¹ Sunder John Boopalan is the Minister for Community Life and Theologian in Residence at First Baptist church in Boston, MA.

² Thanks are due to Myoung Hun – whose work on masculinities and his own positive masculinity I have come to appreciate and enjoy—for pointing me to these sources.

injustice. The scales from my eyes slowly began to fall, but not fully. “I am not like these other men,” I often thought to myself.

I entered formal graduate theological education and was introduced to the centrality of liberation and freedom in Christian tradition and theology. I embraced this wholeheartedly. “Justice” was the language I spoke all day. Such rhetoric, unfortunately, did not align with what I witnessed around me. My entering class comprised mostly of men and there were a couple of women. More than one of my male classmates went around to other men (including me) in the class and shared with much pride news of their sexual exploits – their own versions of “grab them by the p****.” I made a promise to myself that I will do everything in my power to challenge and transform gendered violence. Little did I realize the enormity of the task.

After arriving in the United States for further graduate work in September 2010, I enrolled in a course on prejudice. We discussed in class the uproar created by Yale University Fraternity, Delta Kappa Epsilon, that had its initiates march after dark near the women’s dormitory shouting, “No means yes, and yes means anal.” These were men in an Ivy League school. Most are probably set to occupy important positions in twenty-first century North America and possibly other parts of the world as well.

Dominant sexual and cultural codes, written into our memories and habits, inform social practices in more ways than one. I recall a conversation with one professor in New Jersey during which his eyes drifted away from the private conversation we both were having. I followed his eyes as he remarked, “She has long legs.” It took an effort for the professor to refocus on the conversation at hand. While some men are often careful to avoid getting caught in their physical male gaze, many others are unabashedly comfortable in their toxic masculinities. It is my experience that most spaces are steeped in patriarchal and sexist logic.

Anti-oppression, as my time at the Episcopal Divinity School (EDS) has taught me, has to do with more than words. It is a constant spiritual discipline rooted in deep examination of self and world, a perpetual embodiment of freedom, love, and justice, day in and day out. I recall EDS’ embodied commitment to anti-oppression fondly because I often find a problematic tolerance of violent sexist practices even in schools that self-identify as “liberal.” Commitment to anti-oppression and gender justice takes more than a well-worded statement on a webpage. It is in our everyday habits – often mundane – where the rubber meets the road.

In describing my social location, I self-identified as heterosexual male, husband, father, and theologian. There are other self-identities that are central to who I am. However, in order to limit the scope of this essay, I will speak to three identities – husband, father, and theologian – as I offer some possibilities for the role of men in gender justice. As readers would notice, these three areas are instances of men speaking to men. This is intentional.³

³ For me, the importance of men talking to men about gendered violence has been reinforced through conversations with Melanie Webb whose work on Augustine and rape I find a refreshing breakthrough in Augustinian studies. See Melanie Webb, “On Lucretia who slew herself: Rape and Consolation in Augustine’s *De ciuitate dei*,” *Augustinian Studies* 44, no. 1 (2013): 37–58.

First: to husbands

Recently, my wife and I watched the HBO-produced miniseries *Big Little Lies*. In it, Perry's behavior towards his wife, Celeste, is terribly violent. Perry is charming, economically successful, and plays tenderly with his children. Perry is also a cruel wife-beater. As a male watching the show, a variety of emotions welled up within me. When I got married, a friend told me, "You will discover things about yourself you never knew existed." These things that husbands discover about themselves are sometimes surprisingly pleasant and, at other times, shockingly violent. A good husband, however, is not merely one who does not beat his spouse although it certainly includes that.

Indian men are conditioned to eat, not cook. In addition to this, among siblings, sons are often given more food on their plate so that they can get their "manly" strength. Daughters are shown around the kitchen, taught to cook and provide, and enculturated into patriarchy in several such subconscious and coded ways. In matrimonial advertisements – which are very common in India – brides are sought based on their ability to cook, their body shape and height, the color of their skin, and the hierarchy of their caste. While such particular patriarchal entanglements are surely problematic, patriarchy is a global phenomenon. It is for this reason that I cited the example of the behavior of the Yale fraternity.

I recently taught a course that examined the prevalence of structural wrongs. During the week in which we discussed patriarchy, the class grappled with how patriarchal subtexts are surprisingly common. We considered how men behave in mixed settings: how they sit, make eye contact, listen or not, cut someone off, or speak on behalf of others and so on. Often men are blind to these actions; ironically, the very actions they perform every day. My wife often notes how men make eye contact with husbands or men when they speak of "important" matters, either completely ignoring women or, at best, giving them a passing glance. Such actions reveal assumptions about authority, place, and status that are deeply patriarchal. The women have no shortage of the male gaze when it comes to other things – like their body parts – as in the case of the professor who was preoccupied with a woman's legs.

Change is not easy or clear. Indeed, "both men and women are gendered under the same patriarchal system that prescribes and dictates the position of women and girls as well as men and boys."⁴ While women have to consider what this means for them, the focus here is on men. While the difficulty of change is to be acknowledged, the agency that needs to be exercised by men for gender justice cannot be stressed enough. Subverting patriarchy is difficult long-term work. Men need to individually and collectively raise the bar for positive masculinities. This often involves demanding labor both within oneself and in conversation with other men.

No doubt, with increasing changes in gender roles, there is a felt crisis in masculinity. This crisis is precipitated by many elements, but one thing that needs to be put on the table for consideration is a sense of loss that men may feel as they seek to embrace positive masculinities and work towards gender justice. As Jan Reynders notes, "non-conforming gender behavior and non-heteronormative sexual orientation are not tolerated in many

⁴ Jan Reynders, "Where Are the Men? Reflections on Manhood, Masculinities and Gender Justice," in *Bodies in Resistance: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Age of Neoliberalism*, ed. Wendy Harcourt (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 253.

settings and can lead to different forms of violence, exclusion or worse.”⁵ In other words, while subverting patriarchy brings gains with respect to human flourishing it also entails loss. Recognizing and embracing both gains and losses is central to the task of gender justice.

While articulating what loss entails for men, it helps to take a historical view of the unequal dividends that men have enjoyed and continue to enjoy due to patriarchy. Men thus have to be critically conscious of how they have historically occupied spaces and places. Consider the following:

Men remain a very large majority of corporate executives, top professionals and holders of public office. Worldwide, men hold nine out of ten cabinet-level posts in national government, nearly as many of the parliamentary seats and most top positions in international agencies. Men, collectively, receive approximately twice the income that women receive and also receive a great deal of unpaid household labour, not to mention emotional support, from women.⁶

Changing this above-mentioned situation is no joke. As men consider their role in gender justice, it also means coming to terms with a certain amount of loss of privileges men have enjoyed historically that they have taken for granted as “just the way things are.”

Second: to fathers

Beware of playing gender police. Gender policing is done every day, everywhere. Although the content and method may vary, persons are often conditioned into heteronormative behavior. Heteronormativity is, no doubt, challenged, and there are many persons who thrive outside of this framework. This does not change the fact, however, that heteronormativity, continues to be a dominant paradigm. This dominant paradigm is violent, primarily towards women and children, but also towards men and boys.

In the second season of the TV series *Queen Sugar*, Ralph Angel takes his girlfriend, Darla, out on a date. His six-year-old son, Blue, accompanies him. Throughout the first season of the series, Blue is portrayed as often playing with his doll, Kenya. Blue carries Kenya with him to most places. In the second season, Kenya, yet again, makes an appearance at Ralph Angel and Darla’s date night. The male waiter at their table notices Blue playing with his doll and subconsciously plays gender police. The waiter encourages Blue to consider playing with transformers. Ralph Angel, affirming of his son’s choice to play with a female doll all along, creatively steps in, and asks the waiter to bring two ice creams – one for Blue and one for Blue’s doll.

Ralph Angel’s action does three things that men could find instructive. First, it prevents gender police from stepping in without invitation and schooling children into heteronormativity. Given the frequent number of heteronormative intrusions into children’s lives, such prevention takes vigilance and foresight. Second, it protects Blue from being humiliated and/or confused. Children often get mixed signals from third persons that may sincerely believe that they have in mind the good of the child while undertaking heteronormative intrusions. While parents (men and women) cannot control everything that comes at the child, they can certainly be alert and protect the child from overt and covert

⁵ Reynders, “Where Are the Men? Reflections on Manhood, Masculinities and Gender Justice,” 254.

⁶ Raewyn Connell, *Confronting Equality: Gender, Knowledge and Global Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 13.

humiliation or confusion. Third, Ralph Angel's action of ordering ice cream for both Blue and his doll celebrates Blue's non-conforming behavior. This too is instructive for fathers because fathers often have, among others, two choices: to either tolerate or celebrate their children's non-conforming actions.

Children's actions often tend to be non-conforming. Preventing policing and protecting children from humiliation and/or confusion, while necessary, need the additional willed effort to celebrate non-conforming actions. Those fathers who have been conditioned into heteronormativity will find such celebration uncomfortable. Gender justice beckons us to wade in these waters.

Third: to male theologians

Some of my examples come from theological settings because theological settings are not free of gendered violence. Recently, I came to know of female students who have been sexually harassed by their fellow students at some of the best theological schools in the U.S. Unfortunately, they have not had the support of their home institutions. While these women continue to find ways to thrive in the midst of such violence, it does not change the fact that gender injustice is a serious concern that needs urgent reformation in many circles, including theological circles. Male theologians who talk of justice often exclude gender justice in their theory and theology. More often, however, gender justice is absent in male theologians' practice.

Myoung Hun reminds us that "masculinity, as a hypothetical construct, has been conceptualized in a variety of different ways: as a set of practices, an ideology, a gender role, psychological/personality traits, and/or power and dominance."⁷ Male theologians have work to do in addressing these conceptualizations that are often theologically inflected. Religion has often been complicit in the perpetration of toxic masculinity and patriarchy. Religious males need to take stock of this and redress accompanying wrongs.

While I am tempted to offer examples of theologically-inflected patriarchy from the U.S. "deep south," I avoid this easy way out. While stories of women theological students in the south not being allowed to take courses on preaching may be astounding to some readers, I cannot help but recall extremely wealthy churches in the heart of "liberal" Princeton that do not allow women to teach mixed audiences unless accompanied by a male leader. Patriarchy, like other structural wrongs, characterizes both south and north, liberal and conservative. Geography, class, and political affiliation are not barriers to its manifestations.

What can men do? While the list of possibilities is endless, let me restrict myself to two simple (in principle) but surprisingly difficult (in practice) things we can do as male theologians.

First, let us stop forgiving ourselves for being complicit in patriarchy's wrongs. As a heterosexual male conditioned into patriarchy's heteronormativity, I understand the desire to turn over a new leaf. Such desire cannot, however, just wish away the past. Healing ourselves requires more than just forgiving ourselves and moving on. Like any deep wound, patriarchy's pus first needs excision. This painful process is a prerequisite to self-healing.

⁷ Myoungyun Yun, "Masculinity," in *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, ed. David A. Leeming (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2016), 1.

Indeed, we men first need to free ourselves from ourselves before we truly become healers of the world.

While girls and women continue to suffer unimaginable violence due to gender violence and sexism, boys and men are wounded by patriarchy too. In this sense, the violence suffered by men due to patriarchy needs acknowledgment and address. The role of men in gender justice requires freeing oneself from incurring and inflicting wounds.

Healing ourselves of patriarchy's wounds requires us men to talking authentically to other men about our wounds – wounds that we have incurred and wounds that we have inflicted. Such authentic conversations involve letting our guards down and becoming vulnerable. While this, in itself, is something that patriarchal logic resists, it is to be further followed by gender-just actions.

Men need to hold each other accountable. I am embarrassed to admit the number of male theologians I know who are, to use a Tamil colloquialism, "*kai party*," translated as "hand party" or "a party [person] who has notorious hands." These are men who are notorious for touching women with their "hands" (literally and figuratively) inappropriately and sexually harassing them. While many of these men's names are shared among circles of women who warn each other of lurking dangers in the academia, I find it shameful that men don't call these other men out as often as we could. I will admit that calling out another man for being sexually violent towards women is an extremely difficult thing to do. Men will certainly face resistance from other men when they call other men out. This difficulty, however, is the least of the reasons that must prevent men from pursuing gender justice.

Second, I find that, as men, we are conditioned to instinctively collaborate with other men on theological projects. Whether it be an informal coffee/beer or a formal academic panel, male-dominated theological discussions, despite the otherwise ecumenical content therein, perpetuate patriarchy's *modus operandi*.

Holding the microphone for women rather than hoarding every opportunity to project one's own voice, work, and person is one way forward. Every year, it may be a good practice to think of the number of predominantly male theological discussions that we men are part of. Can we do better? I sincerely believe we can with the help of Cornel West's dictum, "Fail, fail again, fail better." Failing better in the pursuit of gender justice is perhaps not an optimistic point of view. It is, however, a good start for reformation.