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YOU ARE NOT BORN A MAN, YOU ARE MADE ONE...BY YOUR MOTHER, TOO OR: HOW MOTHERS WANT THEIR SONS TO BE

Gerhard Amendt



ABSTRACT

Men seem unable to speak about their collective disparagement by feminism and gender politics. This silence could be related to peculiarities of their relationship with their mother during the early years of their lives. Mothers' influence on the development of their sons is treated as if cultural influences as well as family background and the relationship to their mother were irrelevant in shaping masculinity. The incipient reflection on the relationship of mothers to their sons is not only promising but momentous because it is the first of many steps in overcoming the pervasive feminist perpetrator-victim ideology. The tradition of reconciliatory dialogue thus regains a future.

Keywords: boys, feminism, males, men, misandry, mothers, sons

INTRODUCTION

In 1994, the American magazine TIME published a story that attracted considerable attention. On the right-hand-side of the cover, it read: ARE MEN REALLY THAT BAD? On the left of the cover was a man in an elegant suit. The white shirt was ironed, his hand sported a wedding ring and his arms white cuffs. The tie looked fashionable. It was not a lower-class man, more middle-class. And then his face! An oversized nose with flared nostrils, his cheeks drooping and fat-bloated, his eyes narrowed, promising nothing friendly. The ears oversized to listen. The mouth slightly soiled. In short: a pig's head protruded from the suit.

The cover picture¹ horrified many men: Men—a class of pigs? Scarcely a year before, a woman had cut off her sleeping husband's penis with a kitchen knife—in anger over withheld orgasms—and had thrown it away. It was found and sewn back on. Not a few wondered whether TIME wanted to warn "swinish" men about the punishment of genital mutilation or whether it wanted to denounce the storm of enthusiasm of tone-deaf feminists for castration—seeing that not all feminist battalions were enthusiastic about it. However, a few wordsmiths praised this wife's orgy of mutilation. One German feminist was visibly relieved that women had finally realized the many uses of knives: for chopping parsley, yes, but also for mutilating unwelcome men.

The editors of TIME were still hoping that they could intervene in a moderating way in the emerging polarization of gender relations and stop the destructive anger about “incomplete men”. That was a misjudgment. Everything only got worse. The past decades have distorted the image of men in a way that hardly anyone wanted to imagine. Today, all this is steeped deep in a leaden silence in society. One does not talk about gender relations unless one speaks of women as victims and men as perpetrators—no matter whether from pulpits, in

¹ <https://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19940214,00.html>

churches, parliaments, parties and university seminars. Exceptions are hard to find.

This situation harbors the danger that we will disintegrate into a society of antagonism that will let our culture of conflict resolution perish. Because serious conflicts are not addressed and consequently no longer resolved, this culture resembles a society that does not want to know about the dangers to democracy and slides wide awake into totalitarianism. Little has remained of the appreciation of conflict orientation in the education and pedagogy that emanated from some universities and colleges in the 60s and 70s. Fear prevails, and the trend has a growing influence even on the attitudes of scientists in almost all disciplines. This development is driven by an atmosphere of censorship and repression that makes the search for truth, the core of science, an existential risk.

CULTURAL ADAPTATION SHAPES BIOLOGY

The aim here is to explore what it could be that has for decades made men, in particular, unable to speak about the collective disparagement by feminism and gender politics. I want to examine—among the many possible explanations—the assumption that the silence of sons could be related above all to peculiarities of their relationship with their mother during the early years of their lives. This connection is of such outstanding importance that constant efforts are made in politics and the media to prevent it from seeing the light of day. The question is so explosive that even research is studiously avoiding it. Consequently, mothers' influence on the development of their sons is treated as a natural phenomenon, as if cultural influences as well as family background and the relationship to their mother were irrelevant in shaping masculinity. And in family life, exactly the opposite is true. The very suggestion that this relationship might be repeated later in adult men's relationships with women eludes the curiosity of most scientists. Because many researchers fear the precarious uncertainties of the son-mother relationship, from which their own masculinity also emerged, it is kept hidden from view.

Not all men have come to terms with the culture of debasement. Some claimed that their lives were not easy either, then or now. They demand equal rights of recognition as sufferers. Feminists and gender ideologists sensed in this an attempt to seize the benefits of the culture

of compassion offered to female victims: Renunciation of own activity and empathy as consolation.

The attempt, on the other hand, to understand the world of gender relations beyond victims and perpetrators and to gain a differentiated view of their everyday dynamics is what I want to outline using the example of Volker Pilgrim's book, *Muttersöhne (Mother's Sons)*, which caused an uproar in Germany in 1986.

Pilgrim tried to find an answer to the fiercely contested question of why "men are the way they are". How is it that feminist activists, almost unopposed in their single passion, have been able to ascribe every individual man to an ominous collective of violent and misogynistic men? Starting with war and ending with domestic fisticuffs! That they are responsible spouses and fathers did not seem worth mentioning, nor that they go to war to defend family and home—without being asked whether they want to or not.

Pilgrim's core question came as somewhat of a shock: what **is** the role that mothers play in the lives of their sons that produces "destructive masculinity à la Roosevelt, Stalin and Hitler"? Mind you, in so doing he adopted the general feminist thesis of male propensity for use of violence in order to move on to the search for causes. His bold conjectures about powerful maternity opened up the wide range of intimate biographies of mothers and sons. Many puzzle as to why men remain silent about the responsibility for undesirable developments that has fallen to them in the history of humanity. Surprisingly, the issue is not that men do not embrace the "patriarchal collective guilt" that is offered to them by feminists, as the first step towards betterment. Rather, it is about the fact that many men themselves believe they are not good men and fathers, that they believe they have failed. Precisely because they believe that, in their relationships with girlfriends and wives, they have not continued with the duties towards their mother that they learned in childhood.

Other men, on the other hand, are not affected by these reproaches. Their motto seems to be this: as long as women only heap reproaches on us, they have not given up hope that we will improve and at some point, come up to their expectations. By contrast, these men see their role in the partnership is recognized and leave it at that. Their self-image of the "wish-fulfiller"

and breadwinner is not shaken by the storm of debasement. On the contrary, they see it emphatically confirmed. They see themselves as "providers" with potential for improvement.

THE PRESUMPTION OF SERVING WOMEN'S NEEDS

It cannot be denied that men are haunted by self-doubt and unfathomable feelings of guilt, at least in the present, and strive to make amends. This is a part of our culture of sex relations as they are practiced day after day and year after year as a matter of course. I am thinking of the constant efforts to do right by women which dominate most men their entire lives. This is a fundamental element of male identity that points to roots in evolutionary biology, simply manifested in contemporary shape. How else could it be understood that since time immemorial men have taken on the tough and dangerous jobs, gone to wars both just and unjust, work in the mines, hardly ever see their children, without it ever occurring to them—even in these times of constant equality and anti-discrimination rhetoric—to demand at least something similar from women, or at least to expect recognition?

The "concern for women", courtesy and considerate politeness can be observed early in the lives of boys. It becomes more pronounced with female schoolmates, and even more so with girlfriends, wives and in everyday working life. For example, a high school graduate more than twenty years ago said in a conversation that girls were preferred by teachers—both men and women. The matter-of-factness with which he accepted this injustice points to early experiences, especially with his mother. He had already learned as a child that the "man" had to take a back seat. This instance explains why male self-confidence is being damaged by contemporary culture. It can be seen in the fact that young men are again living longer with their parents and delaying the move into independence as well as into stable sexual-libidinous relationships, not to mention the high number of suicides by men and boys. Above all, they are also withdrawing from the desire to have children. So, it's not just about whether what men are accused of is true, but that they themselves question it on a completely different level of their self-awareness: as a doubt that they understand women and that they are good enough for women.

Fantasies about the patriarchy and destructive gender ideology are not the only reasons why men remain silent. Particularly prominent is the discussion about violence in partnerships, "according to which men alone" are the (mis)doers. This contradicts not only men's everyday experiences, but also what women themselves report about violence in surveys—i.e. , that they use violence as frequently as men.

WHY MOTHERS COVER UP THEIR SONS' DEBASEMENT

I will briefly address the question of why the majority of women are also silent about the devaluation of "the men". It turns out that the debasement of one gender leads to the debasement of the other, regardless of who starts it. For sweeping statements such as "all men are potential perpetrators of violence" or "incapable of empathy"² devalue not only their partners, husbands and sons, but also their fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers. Masculinity is seen by many critics of masculinity as the "incarnation" of such evils as: emotional defensiveness, rape culture, destruction of nature, lack of empathy, capitalism, etc. Women, they conclude, are victims of men's world. The political strategy behind this is that women are supposed to find it more rewarding to be members of the club of victims than to honor the memory of their male ancestors. This is not only a cultural breach, but it also devalues one's own mothers because they did not put a stop to the "male machinations". This contributes—ultimately—to a combination of female self-aggrandizement (the future is female³) and self-pity, as we ritually experience on International Women's Day. Against this background, the 2023 statement by the German Federal Minister of the Interior, Nancy Faeser, gains significance⁴. She has elevated fatal disputes in partnerships to the status of femicide, quite literally the systematic killing of women: "*killed because they are women*" and "*because*

² See Carol Gilligan and Naomi Snider: *Why does Patriarchy Persist?* 2018.

³ Margarete Mitscherlich: *Die Zukunft ist weiblich*. [The Future is Female.], 1997.

⁴ Nancy Faeser: <https://www.bmfsfj.de/bmfsfj/aktuelles/alle-meldungen/lisa-paus-und-nancy-faeser-stellen-zahlen-zu-gewalt-in-partnerschaften-vor-205244>.

men want to exercise power over them"⁵. It is no longer the fatally escalating psychodynamics of quarrelling partners that counts, nor the judgement of criminal judges who decide on the severity of the act, informed by expert opinions and research by psychological experts. Rather, the individual dynamics of violence are attributed to a societal strategy of destruction, allegedly comparable to the genocide of Jews, homosexuals, Armenians or Cambodians. Equating the murder of women to genocide is a party-political strategy to incite fear and hostility between men and women. And between generations, too. (It is almost reminiscent of the atmosphere of fear in the 1950s when, during the "Cold War" between the West and the Soviet Union, states of anxiety pervaded everyday life because it was feared that threatening scenarios could turn into a "hot" war).

I HAVE A SON; I NEED NO-ONE ELSE

In the search for motives that could shed light on the sons' silence about the omnipresent culture of debasement, the idea of the special relationship with the mother warrants closer inspection⁶. Their specialty is the great appreciation of the son. Thus, even in our culture, the birth of a son, albeit with restraint, is still received with greater joy than that of a girl. The relationship with sons is not only different, but more intense than that with daughters. Along with it, mothers place expectations on their young son that they do not want to place on their daughter. What are these maternal expectations expressed in? As my research in *The Lives of Unwanted Children*⁷, *How Mothers See Their Sons*⁸ and *Longing for Dad*⁹ and family therapy case studies from the 1990s¹⁰ show, a not insignificant core of such mother-son relationships

⁵ Faeser, loc. cit., 2023.

⁶ Amendt: *Wie Mutter Ihre Söhne sehen*. [How mothers see their sons.], Fischer Verlag, 1994.

⁷ Gerhard Amendt: "I didn't divorce my kids!" How Fathers Deal with Family Break-Ups, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt 2008.

⁸ Gerhard Amendt: *Wie Mütter ihre Söhne sehen*., Fischer Verlag, 1994.

⁹ Gerhard Amendt: *Vatersehnsucht*. [Yearning for Dad.], Universitätsdruck Bremen, 1999.

¹⁰ Horst Eberhard Richter: *Die Gruppe*. [The Group.] 1995.

can be outlined as follows: Under their care and love they want their son to grow up into the masculinity that comes as close as possible to their wishes and unfulfilled fantasies of good and desirable masculinity. These desires will resemble the idealizing expectations they placed in their son's father in the phase of first infatuation. However, if these expectations were not fulfilled by the husband—or by other men in the course of their lives—many mothers try to bring up their son in such a way that at least he comes close to what their ideas of a good man are. This is—to put it briefly—the explosive basis of many mother-son relationships. The essential prerequisite, however, is that they choose the son as a "comforter" to comfort them over disappointments and avoid confrontation with the son's father. This makes much of men's behavior understandable: not only the silence in the face of everyday debasement, which points to feelings of shame and self-doubt, but also in severe cases the violence that can be attributed to abuse in early childhood. If we want to understand men's violence and not just condemn it, then we must also consider what experiences such men might have had in their childhood.

I want to leave aside at this point the fact that many men experience severe outbursts of violence as a result of war experiences, lifelong crippling or brain damage and injuries leading to traumatization¹¹. This has been demonstrated in research in the USA among male as well as female soldiers in the Iraq war, etc.

LIFE-LONG SUBMISSION TO MOM

Those boys who were their mother's "reliable comforter" in childhood (who sensed her wishes with utmost sensitivity and tried to fulfil them) will find it difficult as adult men to shape their love relationships spontaneously, because the mother acts like a built-in compass

¹¹ Susanne W. Gibbons, Edward J. Hickling, Scott D. Barnett, Pamela L. Herbig-Wall, and Dorraine D. Watts. "Gender Differences in Response to Deployment Among Health Care Providers in Afghanistan and Iraq." *Journal of Women's Health*. 2012, May 21 (5).

that gives them the orientation as to what women expect from a "good man". For better or worse, quite a few men are stuck in the straitjacket of submission to their mother all their lives. They are mothers' sons, inwardly bound to their mothers. This makes it difficult to pursue their own wishes as a man and, above all, to both recognize and acknowledge the individual wishes of one's wife or partner—the reason being that the son wants to conform to the image of a good man and, on top of that, to become a better man than his father. This puts shackles on the son. His spontaneity will suffer. And as long as the sons are young, they will not be able to stand up to this. Rather, they are happy to be able to step into the oversized shoes into which only the father's feet fit. They feel that they can make their mothers happy, but luckily for them only to a certain extent. This is frustrating for the sons and a source of frequent anger and aggression towards their mother, which they cannot allow in childhood. What they are not allowed to show, gradually morphs into the compulsive sense of duty to fulfilment that becomes a trait of their personality. However, the older the sons become, the more they suspect that their childlike impartiality has also been lost. Mixed in with the pride of being as good as their father are feelings of diffuse irritability and disgruntlement. And as they grow older and enter into relationships, they are unconsciously driven by the false conviction that no one, and certainly not women, should tell them how to "treat women well". The tragedy of this is that their experiences with their mother blindly reanimate the repressed anger of childhood, forming the compulsive basis of the sons' know-it-all controlling behavior and thus affecting the daughters of the following generation.

This constellation can nevertheless make men with a history of childlike submission to the mother's world of desires an understanding lover, but one who has a disadvantage. His ideas of what a woman needs and "has to want" are modelled on his experiences with his mother and in extreme cases are a copy of her. The more closely he follows the mother's image, the more likely it is that he will become the "well-meaning controller" in the relationship. His female partner then experiences that her own wishes go unheeded. This is a great danger to any relationship. For both women and men, it increases the likelihood that arguments will

take a violent turn. The inability to empathize¹² that men are so often accused of these days, but for which there is no scientific evidence, cannot be understood in those cases where the accusation is true without recognizing the problem of a controlling mother and an inactive father.¹³

PUT AN END TO THE BLAME GAME!

The attempt by the German Federal Minister of the Interior in 2023 to declare relationships with lethal outcome as femicide against women is the culmination of a policy that wants to polarize men and women. It is the attempt to turn the coexistence of men and women into a scenario of permanent threat and states of anxiety for women in view of supposed constant male propensity for violence.

If Volker Pilgrim's book, *Mothers' Sons*, were published for the first time in today's political atmosphere, it would certainly fail because his sacrilege was not only that he presented men as creatures of a mother-made encroachment. What would lead to the suppression of Pilgrim's thesis today is his statement that women not only have power in the partnership and over the children, but thereby equality in society, and that they do not experience their life as a hardship but, as the latest research shows, are content with it. If they can make "Stalin, Hitler and Napoleon and Richard Wagner" what they were, Pilgrim argues, then they are easily able to model the everyday man as well. And that is true. Pilgrim's boldness was still possible in the 1980s—not least because women were still brave enough to listen to his theses and think about the mother-son relationship. They exposed themselves to unfamiliar aspects of female power play, which confirmed their ability to control their sons

¹² Carol Gilligan attempted to prove the superior empathy of women in an argument with Lawrence Kohlberg, but she was unable to do so empirically. Today's attempt in the media to establish an empathy gap corresponds to the political desire to further intensify the debasement of men.

¹³ Nicola Graham-Kevan (2006). Power and Control in Relationship Aggression. In: John Hamel, Tonia Nicholls (eds.) *Family intervention in domestic violence: a handbook of gender inclusive theory and treatment*, Springer Publisher Company.

(and daughters)¹⁴ and at once opened their eyes to the precarious consequences this can have for sons and society alike. Seeing themselves as "all-round victims with a constant need for counselling" was alien to them. This openness is largely lacking in contemporary gender activists. They call for the state to solve problems for them, identify perpetrators and create language of discrimination such as "femicide"¹⁵, so that gender activists in women's organizations can be "victimized"—so that gender activists can usher women into the unwritten right to claim victim status and pity and to disparage men. Consequently, all research findings that are likely to replace the distorted view with facts are suppressed—especially by federal government departments.

But the fantasy of a world divided into victims and perpetrators is not only enacted by feminists and gender ideologists. It is a project that now permeates the whole of society. The motto is to "help the victims", but not the "perpetrators". More and more, the services of partially state-sponsored organizations, most of which operate outside professional standards and also only address women, are replacing support for dialog between relationship or marriage partners about their conflicts to resolve them. Both victim-perpetrator thinking or, more consequentially, the perception of gender relations as an irreconcilable friend-foe polarity creates a perspective in which the mediation of conflicts tends to be abandoned as a desirable goal.

Thus, the socio-politically decisive question of how fisticuffs between relationship partners arise remains in the dark. Both in the public media, large educational institutions, the Protestant church and left-wing parties, the irreconcilable polarity seems to be a done deal. This overlooks the fact that all the women and men, who want to know what they could have

¹⁴ Medeiros, R. A., & Straus, M. A. (2006). Gender differences in risk factors for physical violence between partners in marital and dating relationships. Durham, NH: *Family Research Laboratory, University of New Hampshire*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/4oVnEm>

¹⁵ Faeser, loc. cit.

"done differently" to prevent violence, are left out in the cold – because professional help is withheld from them. Mostly they are only offered a shift of blame onto the male partner. And the praises sung to the "peace-loving woman" are supposed to give them consolation. On the other hand, women are perfectly aware of their own violence. Besides, research has been proving it with facts for decades that apply equally to cases with severe to fatal outcomes. Without the help of psychotherapists, they will be unable to free themselves from their destructive psychopathology. Labels of guilty perpetrator versus innocent victim help neither side but only harm women and men alike.

As long as politicians try to blame men for "femicide", i.e., the systematic killing of women according to premeditated intentions, violent episodes cannot be stopped and the transmission of violence to children of the next generation can hardly be prevented. Encouraging alone is the countervailing trend, which shows the majority of the population not sharing the paranoid model of "sole male propensity to violence", like many other prejudices about men that are repeated by the media today to excite the population and increase sales figures.

The incipient reflection on the relationship of mothers to their sons is not only promising but momentous because it is the first of many steps in overcoming the perpetrator-victim ideology. The tradition of reconciliatory dialogue thus regains a future. Fathers, as passive participants, must also consider that they let mothers get away with it when they drift into a "secret hideaway" with their sons—precisely by withdrawing from partnership conflicts and wishes. This conflict-averse connivance facilitates—in the worst case—the son drifting into compliant obedience to the mother.

Those who refuse this enlightened discourse and portray women only as helpless victims and indulge in pity for them are in reality their greatest enemy because they have no confidence in women and never tire of denying agency now and in history. This is the central problem of feminists and gender ideologists, and it demonstrates their individual love of victimhood.

Not without pleasure, Volker Pilgrim reproached women for the fact that with their desire for revenge on “unsatisfactory men”, they themselves produce the monsters who harass them and who would also make life difficult for their daughters.

As exaggerated as Pilgrim's thesis is, he has shown men and women that both exercise power and that it is also possible to exercise power benevolently—even when raising children together.

In the debate on violence, shame and pride, society must return to the certainty that men and women are not only the forgers of their own happiness, but also of their own unhappiness. No one doubts this about happiness, but with misery it's different. The horror scenario of femicide is the new weapon to suppress this truth.

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