

# Multivalent masculinity and #MeToo

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## Abstract

The deadly combination of male supremacy and toxic masculinity (MSTM) systemically and culturally promotes, supports, and defends violence against women, girls, femmes, and “lesser” men. This article provides working definitions for male supremacy and toxic masculinity and explores the damage they can do on their own and when combined. Multivalent masculinity offers a new way to navigate gender identity and expression by allowing for a spectrum of experiences. The infographic of the gender unicorn, developed by Trans Student Educational Resources, is a useful tool for “men’s” groups to employ as they seek to cultivate multivalent masculinity. The most important work of multivalent masculinity is: (i) to break open the definition, understanding, and recognition of what it means to “be a man”; (ii) to be painfully cognizant of the harm done by MSTM; and (iii) actively to resist being shackled or defined by MSTM.

## Keywords

gender unicorn, male supremacy, men’s groups, MSTM, multivalent masculinity, toxic masculinity

## Introduction: Defining terms

The generational, systemic trauma caused by male supremacy and toxic masculinity came into full public view thanks to the #MeToo movement. What was also brought into full public view, that has been known to women and girls for centuries, is how pervasive predatory behavior is (not was) and how well it is hidden in plain view. The deadly cocktail of male supremacy and toxic masculinity systemically and culturally promotes, supports, and defends violence against women, girls, femmes, and “lesser” men. Conjoining male supremacy and toxic masculinity creates an evil that is exponentially greater than the sum of its parts.

In this article, I employ definitions of male supremacy and toxic masculinity in the following ways. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, male supremacy:

misrepresents all women as genetically inferior, manipulative and stupid and reduces them to their reproductive or sexual function—with sex being something that they owe men and that can or even should be coerced out of them. Driven by a biological analysis of women as fundamentally inferior to men, male

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supremacists malign women specifically for their gender. A thinly veiled desire for the domination of women and a conviction that the current system oppresses men in favor of women are the unifying tenets of the male supremacist worldview.<sup>1</sup>

Toxic masculinity creates a distorted view of what it means to be a man:

Toxic masculinity is a narrow and repressive description of manhood, designating manhood as defined by violence, sex, status and aggression. It's the cultural ideal of manliness, where strength is everything while emotions are a weakness; where sex and brutality are yardsticks by which men are measured, while supposedly "feminine" traits—which can range from emotional vulnerability to simply not being hypersexual—are the means by which your status as "man" can be taken away.<sup>2</sup>

## Male supremacy and the spoils of decency

Male supremacy on its own is a severe problem that can nest in the hearts and minds of people with little fanfare or bloodshed. Male supremacy on its own can enshrine systems that relegate women to "domestic" roles: childbearing, children-raising, husband-catering, housekeeping, and hosting. Male supremacy can come across as benevolent, kind, protective. Male supremacists may appear to be doing the best with the way things are and even pose as feminist because they have not done anything "overt" to hinder or disparage women. The male supremacist is often hidden and insidious.

As an ideology, male supremacy is a master at evolution and disguise. One of the most powerful aspects of evolutionary mastery is what I term the "spoils of decency." Though the phrase is original (at least as far as Google shows), the underpinnings are not original. Three broad areas make up the "spoils of decency": (i) sex, (ii) deference/compliance, and (iii) something for nothing.

To understand sex as spoils, the concept of "Nice Guy syndrome" is instructive. Geek Feminism Wiki crystalizes Nice Guy syndrome as "men who view themselves as prototypical 'nice guys,' but whose 'nice deeds' are in reality only motivated by attempts to passively please women into a relationship and/or sex."<sup>3</sup> In her article, "This is Why Being a Nice Guy Just Isn't Enough," Erin Tatum explains that a "nice guy" is "anyone who regards sex as the ultimate goal of interacting with women, and in turn views the idea of a nonsexual friendship with a woman as an abysmal failure."<sup>4</sup> Though "nice guys" may treat women with kindness, understanding, and social graces, ultimately they believe women "owe them sex or romance to compensate [them] for 'investing' their time and energy"<sup>5</sup> into their relationship. In reality these men see the personhood of women as only partial if at all.

A second category of the spoils of decency expected by male supremacists is deference/compliance. Even when men do not have the goal of "passively pleasing women into a [romantic] relationship and/or sex,"<sup>6</sup> their alternative goal is to cultivate women's deference and compliance. This

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1. "Male Supremacy," Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/male-supremacy>.
  2. Harris O'Malley, "The Difference Between Toxic Masculinity and Being a Man," The Good Men Project, June 27, 2016, <https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/the-difference-between-toxic-masculinity-and-being-a-man-dg/>. See also Colleen Clemens, "What We Mean When We Say, 'Toxic Masculinity,'" *Teaching Tolerance*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/what-we-mean-when-we-say-toxic-masculinity>.
  3. "Nice Guy syndrome," Geek Feminism Wiki, [https://geekfeminism.wikia.org/wiki/Nice\\_Guy\\_syndrome](https://geekfeminism.wikia.org/wiki/Nice_Guy_syndrome).
  4. Erin Tatum, "This is Why Being a Nice Guy Just Isn't Enough," *Everyday Feminism*, April 20, 2015, <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/04/being-nice-guy-not-enough/>.
  5. Tatum, "This is Why."
  6. "Nice Guy syndrome."

behavior takes place in numerous settings: workplace, community groups, congregations, families. The man is “courteous and decent” contingent upon women acknowledging that ultimate authority unquestioningly rests with the man.

The third category of the spoils of decency is as simple as it sounds: something for nothing. Every woman I know and hundreds I have never met, but have read, are painfully aware that male colleagues, friends, relatives, and romantic partners are regarded highly for covering the basics. Workplace examples abound, but the focus here is on childcare and housework as prime examples.

Men seen caring for young children—a stroller at the park, or a toddler in the grocery cart—will all-too-often garner “wow stares” and explicit verbal praise from complete strangers. When men are full partners, or even partial ones, in shared housework such as cooking, washing dishes, cleaning, or laundry, they can be seen as overly selfless and loving. Lastly, when men with whom I am in relationship are secretly congratulating themselves for being so awesome and progressive, those self-congratulatory internal thoughts often crack open the door to Nice Guy syndrome and the spoils of sex. At the very least, an expectation arises within us of ego strokes for going above and beyond.

No matter the layers of social graces, flattery, or sophisticated coercion, the underlying notion is that males are superior; therefore, women are subject to men. In other words, male supremacy can masquerade as nice, socially graceful, and sophisticated behavior in men.

## Toxic masculinity and two glaring examples

An interesting twist here is that, although male supremacy and toxic masculinity are often found to be synergistic germs that infect men/males/society, one can be a “carrier” of toxic masculinity and not necessarily be a male supremacist. To say it another way: one could believe a “narrow and repressive description of manhood, designating manhood as defined by violence, sex, status and aggression”<sup>7</sup> and *not* think men are superior to women.

I have been in conversation with men who, I truly believe, genuinely think women are highly competent and capable human beings. They believe that women are as, or even more, valuable to humanity than men are. These men are riddled with a deeply held understanding that to be a man is to be “toxic.” They shy away from violence as a first resort and even work to suppress violence. They will say that murder in most cases and rape in any case are wrong. They will even say that physical aggression against a weaker foe is “unmanly.” Yet, in spite of these convictions, they still maintain a narrow definition of maleness and/or masculinity. Toxic masculinity, on its own, is a devastatingly powerful and resilient enemy of masculine potential.

### Example 1: Harvey Weinstein

Before Harvey Weinstein was arrested for and tried for “rape and other offenses” and subsequently found guilty and sentenced to twenty-three years of imprisonment, he faced trial in the court of public opinion. In a survey conducted in 2017, 71% of those surveyed believed Weinstein was guilty of sexual harassment.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, researchers found a pervasive sense that many more women had not come forward. Nonetheless, the number of people who believe Weinstein *abused*

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7. See n. 2.

8. Kathy Frankovic, “Americans Think Weinstein is a Harasser,” YouGov, October 20, 2017, <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2017/10/20/americans-think-weinstein-harasser>. In this 2017 survey, researchers asked only about the charge of sexual harassment. They did not address the charges of rape and sexual assault. Of the respondents who said they were following the story closely, 90% believed that Weinstein was guilty of sexual harassment.

his power, personality, and privilege to coerce and/or physically force women into sex or sexual contact is split. Many believe Weinstein abused power and/or used criminal force, but more troubling is the large number of people who believe, as Weinstein's lawyer Benjamin Brafman does, that "Mr. Weinstein did not invent the casting couch in Hollywood."<sup>9</sup> The mere fact that women showed up to appointments with Weinstein will be used to claim that whatever occurred was legally consensual. Brafman remarked, "If a woman decides that she needs to have sex [with] a Hollywood producer in order to advance her career and actually does it and finds the whole thing offensive, that's not rape."<sup>10</sup>

Weinstein's case highlights a troubling and historic disparity between what is legal and what is moral. Moreover, it highlights the fact that a culture of "open secrets" is the norm, and "open secrets" almost never count against the perpetrators and almost always destroy and/or diminish the victims.

### Example 2: Brett Kavanaugh

The clarity around wrongdoing that exists with Weinstein is not apparent regarding Brett Kavanaugh. Some describe the accusations against Kavanaugh as a "classic he said, she said." In fact, it is egregiously classic, but even more so, it is revelatory. The case against Kavanaugh reveals that the world is an unsafe, overly hostile place for women, one that fundamentally distrusts women's accounts of their experience. It reveals that the world is a place where straight, white men can do as they please to anyone other than fellow straight, white men, because they will likely suffer no lasting consequences even when confronted by their victims.

In addition to the accusations levied against Kavanaugh by Christine Blasey Ford, allegations were brought forth by Deborah Ramirez, a former classmate of Kavanaugh's at Yale University.<sup>11</sup> In a poll conducted between September 23 and 25, 2018, researchers asked, "If it were proven that Brett Kavanaugh sexually assaulted a woman when they were both high school students 36 years ago, do you think that does or does not disqualify Kavanaugh from being a Supreme Court Justice?" Only 48% responded that sexual assault does disqualify him; 28% of respondents did not think sexual assault should disqualify Kavanaugh, and a remarkable 24% were not sure.<sup>12</sup> Note that the survey question states, "if it were *proven* that Brett Kavanaugh sexually assaulted a woman"; nonetheless, more than half of respondents either did not know or believed sexual assault *should not disqualify* Kavanaugh from serving on the Supreme Court of the United States.

We are reminded of Anita Hill and countless others whose names are on record but who never saw justice. And we must lament the millions of others who dared not report sexual assault or sexual harassment, either for fear of further harm or out of sheer hopelessness, asking "Who would believe me anyway?"

9. Danny Cevallos, "How Weinstein's Lawyer's 'Casting Couch' Comment Could Impact His Defense Strategy," NBC News, May 27, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/how-weinstein-lawyer-s-casting-couch-comment-could-impact-his-n877916>.

10. Cevallos, "How Weinstein's Lawyer." See also Will Pavia, "Benjamin Brafman: 'If a Woman Has Sex to Help Her Hollywood Career, That Is Not Rape,'" Saturday Interview, *London Times*, March 3, 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/benjamin-brafman-interview-if-a-woman-has-sex-to-help-her-hollywood-career-that-is-not-rape-cdcz2rl6p>.

11. See Ronan Farrow and Jane Mayer, "New Allegations of Sexual Misconduct, from Brett Kavanaugh's College Years," *The New Yorker*, September 23, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/senate-democrats-investigate-a-new-allegation-of-sexual-misconduct-from-the-supreme-court-nominee-brett-kavanaugh-s-college-years-deborah-ramirez>. See also Robin Pogrebin and Kate Kelly, *The Education of Brett Kavanaugh: An Investigation* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2019).

12. *The Economist/YouGov* Poll had a sample of 1500 US adults with a  $\pm 2.9\%$  margin of error, [https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/dhi8y4n1yq/econToplines.pdf](https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/dhi8y4n1yq/econToplines.pdf).

United States culture and its legal system do not afford women, girls, and femmes (or any non-white-hetero male) legitimacy as plaintiffs who have suffered profound damage at the hands of the powerful. While this destruction to the personhood of the victims has unlimited magnitude, the fact remains that, when combined, male supremacy and toxic masculinity (MSTM) often lead to a life-and-death situation.

### **MSTM: Not a private matter**

Violence kills. Sometimes violence kills physically. In clinical terms one determines: are they breathing, is there a pulse, what about brain activity? Sometimes violence kills emotionally and/or psychologically. Where people's development is stunted, cycles of violence create a stifling codependency locked in the abuse cycle. People go numb inside; the abused or victimized see themselves as the cause or the root-problem. Sometimes violence causes spiritual death where a person can no longer fathom themselves or others as good, resulting in an abject hopelessness in life.

The statistics of sexual violence and intimate partner violence are staggering.<sup>13</sup> Statistics alone will not move the needle of change, however. Listen to every woman, and the statistics become real and personal. I go to church with someone who has suffered a great deal of injury at the hands of an intimate partner. While she has suffered severe physical injuries in the past, in a conversation with me she said, "The real evil is what he did to my brain. My body healed. Look, it's fine. But my brain will never be ok. I am in a prison of my damaged mind. He's free to wander freely and to keep harming women."

What is imbued in society is reciprocal to what is lived out in the home. Familial proximity or what happens "behind closed doors" does not mean that interpersonal or intimate-partner violence is a private matter, for it is, in fact, caused by, propped up by, and even defended by public or societal influence and formation. My friend's plea is that others see the lasting damage done to her and seek change in our culture and policies so that we can properly recognize the full extent of the trauma done to the minds and souls of victims. This is, as my friend puts it, "the real damage you can't see with your eyes."

The problem is universal. I do not believe this statement is hyperbole. In every era, race, religion, social class, and education level, one can discern the effects of MSTM. So where do we turn our attention? What, if anything, can we do?

### **Multivalent masculinity as a response and possible answer**

The creation of multivalent masculinity emerged, as many things do in my life, in church. My wife, one of the pastors, approached me and said, "We were wondering if you would help us out. There is a longstanding women's group that meets during the week. We think there should be a men's group and that you would be a great leader for it. Would you be willing to do that?"

Initially I responded that I was not willing to lead a men's group. "I work really hard to destroy binary thinking and move us into spectral thinking," I told her, "and a men's group seems an implicit affirmation of the binary." My wife, being the skilled leader that she is, said, "Ok. That's exactly why you should be leading this group. Just do something that can be meaningful for the men in the church."

After considerable thought, I proposed a "men's" group that would be called Multivalent Masculinity, defined as "a group for those who identify as more masculine than feminine (not based on gender/sex). The group's intention is to be a place where old, toxic, male-supremacist

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13. For a comprehensive compilation of statistics, see the website of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), <https://ncadv.org/statistics>.

modes of masculinity are examined and put to rest and new forms of masculinity emerge and evolve.” I also proposed three ground rules, which are subject to ongoing modification as the group decides: (i) respect for self and others—views, dispositions, emotions, and personalities; (ii) share your story—do not share anyone else’s story unless you have explicit permission; and (iii) be an active participant in your listening and speaking.

I provided the group with a glossary of terms, including the definitions for male supremacy and toxic masculinity as defined previously in this article. I also provided definitions for multivalent (having or susceptible to many applications, interpretations, or values), masculinity/masculine (including typical synonyms such as virile, macho, strapping, brawny, as well as antonyms such as weak and effeminate), and intersectionality (the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to any given individual or group). Providing these working definitions gave us some common ground as we began meeting together.

Though the catalyst for the group came from a request from my church, my own study and anguish over finding and shaping new forms of masculinity was already years in process. In the end, I have found that the opportunity to be in relationship with others who identified as masculine was a huge gift. The group has been meeting for a year, and I consider it a somewhat formalized continuation of an ongoing conversation around gender, maleness, and masculinity.

Our initial few meetings and conversations revolved around trying to identify the nebulous angst and internal strife around our male/masculine identities. We discovered that our struggles are quite surprisingly well summarized in the promotional material for the book *For the Love of Men* by Liz Plank:

For centuries, men were told that boys don’t cry and dolls are for girls. They have been instructed to hide their feelings, deny their anxieties, and prove their manliness. Men have long been expected to be the romantic pursuers, the strong, silent types, the breadwinners. But is this really all a man can be?<sup>14</sup>

“Is this really all a man can be?” is a recurring question for our group. Our attempts to answer this question through shared ideas, thoughts, and longings have led me to a resting place (at least for now). We like being men but hate being confined.

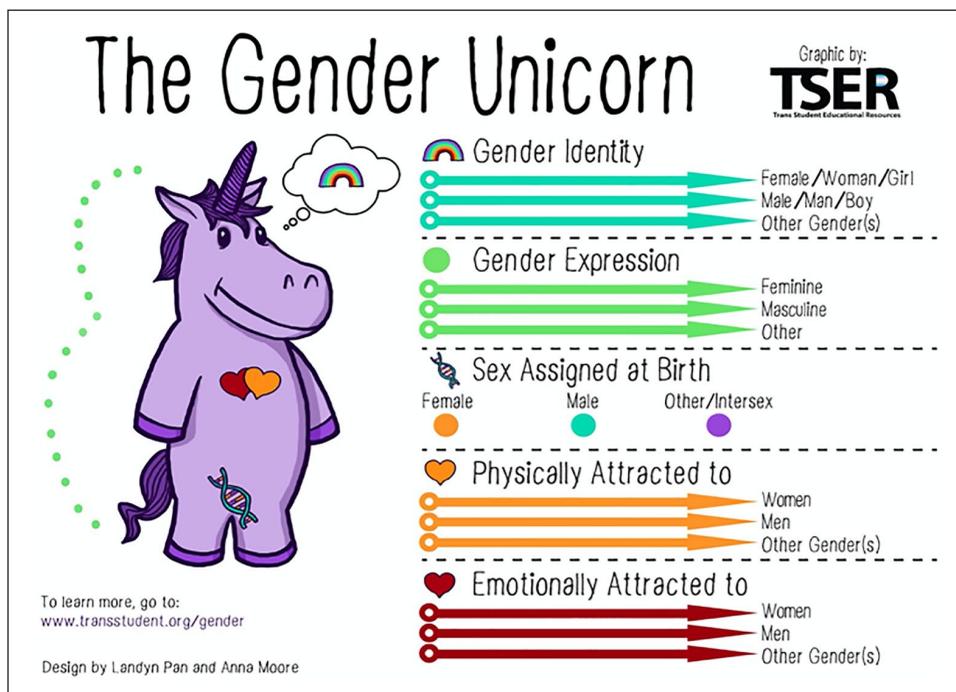
## The gender unicorn

In order to attempt an explanation, I offer the gender unicorn, a graphic designed by Landyn Pan and Anna Moore for Trans Student Educational Resources (Figure 1).<sup>15</sup> This infographic is by no means comprehensive, but it does offer a wonderful framework to promote self-understanding and understanding of others. The icons next to each spectrum label are placed on the unicorn to aid in interpreting the various elements of identity as they relate to sex, gender, and attraction. Descriptions of each of these elements, along with guidance for engaging and analyzing the graphic, are on the Trans Student Educational Resources website ([www.transstudent.org](http://www.transstudent.org)).

Briefly, gender identity refers to “one’s internal sense of being male, female, neither of these, both, or another gender(s).” Gender expression is how one presents one’s gender identity in physical and/or tangible ways, from clothing to voice. Sex assigned at birth refers to “the assignment and classification of people as male, female, intersex, or another sex based on a combination of anatomy.” The graphic includes two categories for attraction, both of which can be shaped by “a

14. See Liz Plank, *For the Love of Men: A New Vision for Mindful Masculinity* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2019).

15. Landyn Pan, Anna Moore, Eli Erlick, et al., “The Gender Unicorn,” Trans Student Educational Resources, <http://www.transstudent.org/gender>.



**Figure 1.** The gender unicorn.

variety of factors including but not limited to gender identity, gender expression, and sex assigned at birth.”<sup>16</sup>

To put the unicorn to use, I share the traditional ideal of a “real man,” and contrast that ideal with where I find myself on the graphic. The traditional ideal of a “real man” is restricted and narrow such that the point of identification must be fixed, singular, and inflexible. Both gender identity and gender expression must be located on the middle lines (“male/man/boy” and “masculine,” respectively), and the dot on both of those lines would be placed all the way to the left. For sex assigned at birth, one would select “male.” For the categories of physical and emotional attraction, a “real man” would be constrained to select only the first line (“women”) and to place the dot all the way to the left.

One of the key differences between where I find myself on this graphic and the traditional ideal of the “real man” is that I am not confined by a “fixed, singular, and inflexible” point. I occupy varying width-spans on each spectrum. In the category of gender identity, I find myself on the middle line (“male/man/boy”), and I place my dot about an inch to the right. My gender identity is solidly male. While I do not think that identity is the best or proper way to be “a man,” I admit that I find comfort in knowing the width I occupy is readily accepted by others. I am not proud of this fact, but it remains true. In the category of gender expression, I likewise select the middle line (“masculine”), but I place two dots on the line (one all the way to the left, and the other quite a long way to the right). While my *identity* is rather narrow, my *expression* is wide. I am perfectly comfortable in work boots, jeans and a flannel shirt; in pink shorts, lime green shirt, and sandals; in flowy linen shirt and pants. How I am feeling and the place I wish to hold in a particular setting often determine how my gender is expressed through dress. My mannerisms and tone of voice are

16. Pan, Moore, Erlick, et al., “The Gender Unicorn.”

rather consistently on the “masculine” side of things. My sex assigned at birth was male. I locate my physical attraction on the first line (“women”). Here again, the spectrum is very wide when it comes to physical attraction. I find intellect and humor extremely “sexy.” Finally, I would locate a dot on each of the lines under the category of emotional attraction. The outer expression of a person has little bearing for me in this area. The qualities of the individual are the draw. Is this person empathic, considerate, lean-towards-intellectualism or intellectual, comfortable with platonic-touch/affection, fun and restless yet grounded? The list goes on.

I have found that the use of the gender unicorn can help people distinguish the different aspects that constitute identity; it can disrupt binary thinking, and it can be a productive starting place not only for disrupting MSTM, but also for creating avenues to cultivate multivalent masculinity.

## Conclusion

The most important work of multivalent masculinity comes down to three things: (i) to break open the definition, understanding, and recognition of what it means to “be a man”; (ii) to be painfully cognizant of the harm done by MSTM; and (iii) to actively resist being shackled or defined by MSTM.

The ideas I present here are still nascent. What comes next is yet to be seen, but the companionship of other “more masculine than feminine” people in the group along with the insights of countless women—writers such as bell hooks and thinkers and leaders like Rev. Bonnie Rambob, Dr. Jennifer Davidson, Rev. Dr. Penny Nixon, and dear friends “who knew me when” and still are willing to connect with me today—all make it possible to chart a course into the unknown. I invite readers who identify as more masculine than feminine (not based on gender/sex) to ask themselves: who are the people in their lives who could help them chart a course to multivalent masculinity?

I believe it is possible to see a world where women, girls, femmes, and children will be able to walk where they want, when they want, wear what they want, and be safe, because men will be free to be their truer and deeper selves, no longer enveloped in abject pain that spills over into harm of the innocent.

## Author biography

Rajeev Rambob is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. Rev. Rambob is founder of Multivalent Masculinity and co-founder of SITI Collective, a non-profit dedicated to supporting individuals, families, and organizations transitioning out of fundamentalism, sectarianism, and right-wing-evangelicalism. SITI Collective is home to the podcast [www.irenicast.com](http://www.irenicast.com), monthly support group [www.theintersections.space](http://www.theintersections.space), and spiritual care practice [www.threshold.space](http://www.threshold.space).