

OPINION



Eric Lee/Bloomberg

A woman visits the Gun Violence Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Some lawmakers hope they can move legislation to halt the ever-increasing mass shootings.

Let's confront the misogyny behind U.S. gun violence

Uvalde started the way so many other mass shootings do: at home. Before driving to and crashing in front of the elementary school, the killer first shot his grandmother.

Gilbert Gallegos was across the street in his yard when he heard the shots and then watched the shooter get in his grandparents' truck. Then came the grandmother, Celia Gonzalez, covered in blood:

"This is what he did. He shot me," she reportedly said to Gallegos.

Later, details emerged about the shooter's past, including the way he would threaten girls online with rape or kidnapping. "I witnessed him harass girls and threaten them with sexual assault, like rape and kidnapping," one Austin teenager told the Washington Post that he and others reported the Uvalde shooter "dozens of times" to no avail. "It was not like a single occurrence. It was frequent."

The connection between mass shooters, who are overwhelmingly men, and domestic violence, sexual harassment and misogyny has been made again and again and again. And yet it remains, by and large, a muted part of our response and soul-searching each time. Confronting the full scope of gun violence, however, has to include confronting misogyny.

Before Charles Whitman killed 14 people at the University of Texas, Austin in 1966, with another victim dying decades later, in what author Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz calls the first "notable mass shooting," he first "strangled his mother to death and murdered his wife by stabbing her in the heart as she slept."

Also in Texas, the misogyny in the 1991 shooting at a Luby's Cafeteria in Killeen was more explicit. George Jo Hennard drove his truck into the restaurant window before shouting "All women of Killeen and Belton are vipers." He then shot and killed 23 people.

More recently, Adam Lanza killed 20 elementary school students and 6 adults at Sandy Hook. "Earlier," Dunbar-Ortiz notes, "Lanza had shot and killed his mother while she slept."

Academics, authors and people who spend their careers thinking about these connections have long been clear on the ways misogyny intertwines and cross-pollinates with a range of extreme ideologies, from white supremacy to anti-Jewish hate, because of the way they appeal to a retrenchment of supposedly threatened identities. "After all," notes a recent report from the Anti-Defamation League, "it's not a huge leap from 'women's quest for equal rights threatens my stature as a man' to 'minorities' and women's quests for equal rights threaten my stature as a white man.'"

The shooter who targeted a largely Black neighborhood in Buffalo where he shot and killed 10 people at a grocery store, for example, relied on a certain brand of conspiracy that argues that powerful Jews are orchestrating the replacement of white people by people of color.

Women, and specifically their reproductive choices, often play a starring role in these conspiracies that echo across the subcultural denominations of ideologies rooted in the maintenance of some sort of status quo hierarchy.

Some of the mass shooters are more explicit about their misogyny. Others less so.

Again, the Uvalde shooter had an alleged history of violent threats and behavior. One of the girls he communicated with told the New York Times that he, "in their previous conversations, had suggested that he had a poor relationship with both his mother and his grandmother and that he had previously



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punched his older sister, kicked his grandmother and shoved an ex-girlfriend."

Were these behaviors incidental to his actions at Robb Elementary? Were they predictive?

Plenty of misogynists do not go on to murder 21 people. But they do create a culture that helps light the match. It matters, then, that

the flame found its oxygen supply, at least in part, from a misogyny that can seem so commonplace we inhale it with every breath. Some of the girls he threatened felt they had to shrug it off as just "how online is."

The blame often falls on technology and the platforms that help spread these views but technology is the way it is because society is the way it is. It amplifies, intensifies and shapes society, yes, but it is not independent of it.

I think about how young I was when I first got that feeling in my stomach — fear, I guess, but muted by self-doubt — from a boy, whose misogyny everyone laughed at or shrugged off.

I was starting at a new, private middle school and somehow got invited to a party before the year even began. We were standing outside in the backyard when one of the popular older boys said something sexually explicit to me that all these years later I'm still too self-conscious to print.

Everyone else laughed. I was speechless. The social hierarchy had been made instantly clear to me.

Over time, I learned to trust that feeling, which evolved from fear to recognition and insight; an understanding that, though it is normalized, misogyny shouldn't be normal and that I can interrupt it for myself and for others. But it took dozens more incidents like that one, some much worse.

Now I wonder what age my young daughters will be when they first encounter that feeling. What age they will be when that feeling grows so familiar they learn to rely on it. I wonder whether I will help them recognize it without the self-doubt I remember so well.

Part of that doubt was because I didn't quite have the language to name it and I assumed harassment was something more overt, something akin to assault — or at least something that others wouldn't laugh at when it happened right in front of them.

Despite the thoughts and prayers crowd's wishes, Uvalde has brought renewed urgency to efforts to curb gun violence. Though we tend to think of mass shootings as involving a lone gunman and strangers, 54 percent of mass shootings, defined as incidents in which four or more people are killed, not including the shooter, involve domestic or family violence. Limiting access to guns makes such violence decidedly less deadly.

But another critical intervention to reducing gun violence is to address directly the misogyny that so often undergirds it. This has to happen in our families, schools, legal systems and communities.

We have to call it out. We have to interrogate the ways that misogyny intertwines with other ideologies that feed on fears about a group's perceived loss of power and status. And we have to teach boys to reject the hierarchy of gender they are often socialized in because it ultimately limits them as well.

We rightly discuss the dangers of guns. We can't forget the dangers of misogyny.

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ESSAY

I am more than the 'Napalm Girl'

By Kim Phuc Phan Thi
NEW YORK TIMES

I grew up in the small village of Trang Bang in South Vietnam. My mother said I laughed a lot as a young girl. We led a simple life with an abundance of food, since my family had a farm and my mom ran the best restaurant in town. I remember loving school and playing with my cousins and the other children in our village, jumping rope, running and chasing one another joyfully.

All of that changed on June 8, 1972. I have only flashes of memories of that horrific day. I was playing with my cousins in the temple courtyard. The next moment, there was a plane swooping down close and a deafening noise. Then explosions and smoke and excruciating pain. I was 9 years old.

Napalm sticks to you, no matter how fast you run, causing horrific burns and pain that lasts a lifetime. I don't remember running and screaming, "Nóng quá, nóng quá!" ("Too hot, too hot!") But film footage and others' memories show that I did.

You've probably seen the photograph of me taken that day, running away from the explosions with the others — a naked child with outstretched arms, screaming in pain. Taken by the South Vietnamese photographer Nick Ut, who was working for the Associated Press, it ran on the front pages of newspapers worldwide and won a Pulitzer Prize. In time, it became one of the most famous images from the Vietnam War.

Nick changed my life forever with that remarkable photograph. But he also saved my life. After he took the photo, he put his camera down, wrapped me in a blanket and whisked me off to get medical attention. I am forever thankful.

Yet I also remember hating him at times. I grew up detesting that photo. I thought to myself, "I am a little girl. I am naked. Why did he take that picture? Why didn't my parents protect me? Why did he print that photo? Why was I the only kid naked while my brothers and cousins in the photo had their clothes on?" I felt ugly and ashamed.

Growing up, I sometimes wished to disappear not only because of my injuries — the burns scarred a third of my body and caused intense, chronic pain — but also because of the shame and embarrassment of my disfigurement. I tried to hide my scars under my clothes. I had horrific anxiety and depression. Children in school recoiled from me. I was a figure of pity to neighbors and, to some extent, my parents. As I got older, I feared that no one would ever love me.

Meanwhile, the photograph became even more famous, making it more difficult to navigate my private and emotional life. Beginning in the 1980s, I sat through endless interviews with the press and meetings with royalty, prime ministers and other leaders, all of whom expected to find some meaning in that image and my experience. The child running down the street became a symbol of the horrors of war. The real person looked on from the shadows, fearful that I would somehow be exposed as a damaged person.

Photographs, by definition, capture a moment in time. But



Chuck Zoeller/Associated Press

Kim Phuc Phan Thi, right, was the subject of the Pulitzer Prize-winning photo taken in 1972 by then-Associated Press photographer Nick Ut, left.

the surviving people in these photographs, especially the children, must somehow go on. We are not symbols. We are human. We must find work, people to love, communities to embrace, places to learn and to be nurtured.

It was only in adulthood, after defecting to Canada, that I began to find peace and realize my mission in life, with the help of my faith, husband and friends. I helped establish a foundation, traveling to war-torn countries to provide medical and psychological assistance to children victimized by war.

I know what it is like to have your village bombed, your home devastated, to see family members die and bodies of innocent civilians lying in the street. Sadly, they are also the images of wars everywhere, of human lives destroyed today in Ukraine.

They are, in a different way, also the horrific images coming from school shootings. We may not see the bodies, as we do with foreign wars, but these attacks are the domestic equivalent of war. The thought of sharing the images of the carnage, especially of children, may seem unbearable — but we should confront them. It is easier to hide from the realities of war if we don't see the consequences.

I cannot speak for the families in Uvalde, but I think that showing the world what the aftermath of a gun rampage truly looks like can deliver the awful reality. We must face this violence head-on, and the first step is to look at it.

I have carried the results of war on my body. You don't grow out of the scars, physically or mentally. I am grateful now for the power of that photo of me as a 9-year-old, as I am of the journey I have taken as a person. My horror — which I barely remember — became universal. I'm proud that, in time, I have become a symbol of peace. It took me a long time to embrace that as a person. I can say, 50 years later, that I'm glad Nick captured that moment, even with all the difficulties that image created for me.

That picture will always serve as a reminder of the unspeakable evil of which humanity is capable. Still, I believe that peace, love, hope and forgiveness will always be more powerful than any kind of weapon.

Kim Phuc Phan Thi lives in Canada and works with the Kim Foundation International, which provides aid to child victims of war around the world. This article originally appeared in the New York Times.

MIDTERM LANES

