Masculinity, trauma, humiliation, entitlement and intersectionality: An annotated poem from the perspective of an adult user of domestic, family and sexual violence

How dare you make me less of a man.

Being a MAN is the only thing I have.

You women chatter and scheme, you never stop. I keep to myself. Trust no-one but myself, it’s got me through this far.

Being a MAN is the one thing that protects me from entering the black hole. You want to take that shield away from me?

Being a MAN dullens the shame of who I was, who I must have been, what I must have deserved.

Dullens the shame of who I have become... or so I whisper, too softly for me to hear.

If I was man enough then, I would have stopped him. He would not have done what he did to us, to me, to my sisters.

Yes, I was a boy. But a boy needs to be a man in moments like that. Not a sis. Not running to the bedroom with his tail between his legs.

If I was a full man, I would have confronted my Mum. She was never there to protect me. Women are weak, indecisive.

My mates were right back then. My new mates are right now. You can’t trust them. Sleeping around. Manipulating us, going behind our backs. At least us men, we fight it out.

I learnt my lessons early, what you need to do to survive.

How dare you make me less of a man.

So what if my skin isn't exactly white. Or if I can't get a stable job or a deposit on a house. I can still be a full man, just as much as any other man, can’t I?

I can, I must, I have to, what am I if I'm not? A girl?

You make me shake with anger. You make my insides collapse.

You don't know the half of what I do to manage this, to manage you. I need to make you feel crazy. To stop those idiots from egging you on. How else do I disarm you?

And you blame me for exploding when everything I try doesn't work and you still challenge me!

I'm hurt. Don't you care? Why do you twist the knife?

I survive through you I whisper inside, and cry out loud to your mother heart.

You think you can see through me. You think you can call me out. You seemed to be different – no, you're just like all the other women controllers in the world. Backing us into a corner. Getting all the big wigs on your side.

No more! I'm getting back what's mine, what's been taken away from me.

How dare you make me feel less of a man.

[end of poem → annotation starts on the next page]

How dare you make me less of a man.

Being a MAN is the only thing I have.

Many men who use violence are very sensitive to 'being made' to feel less of a man. Being a 'full man' can be a highly important part of their identity. Of course, being a 'full man' can mean different things to different men, and in different cultural contexts.

For reasons partly revealed through this poem, these men can feel significant masculinity threat and sometimes deep humiliation when their masculine identity is not affirmed. The patriarchal society they swim in, funneled through their entitlement-based worldview and the rules they set for their partner, mean they can get away with holding her / him / them 'responsible' for his felt humiliation.

You women chatter and scheme, you never stop. I keep to myself. Trust no-one but myself, it's got me through this far.

Misogyny is not just an attitude, it's structural, it's in the fabric of our society. Sexist attitudes both feed and are fed by misogynist structures, systems and myths. Some men affirm their sense of being a full man at the expense of women. 'I am not her, I am better than her, I don't stoop to her level.' They define their masculinity through being not-woman.

For some men, particularly those with a complex trauma background, genuine intimacy can be frightening. They might yearn deep down to truly connect with someone, rather than only demand things from them, but that yearning can be suppressed. It's not a simple case of 'teaching them' emotional literacy skills. Whether we call them beliefs or embodied schema, they can hold a black-and-white sense of how the world works based on entitlement and on protecting themselves from emotional pain.

Being a MAN is the one thing that protects me from entering the black hole. You want to take that shield away from me?

Being a MAN dullens the shame of who I was, who I must have been, what I must have deserved.

Dullens the shame of who I have become... or so I whisper, too softly for me to hear.

Shame can come in many forms. It can mean different things in different cultures, and be expressed and felt differently. For people who have experienced complex trauma and shame-inducing events repeatedly in their childhood, the shame can be chronic. It can be an overwhelming sense of "I am bad… unlovable… worthless… undeserving…"

This sense of 'I deserved what happened to me' can set them up to blame victim-survivors for the harmful behaviours they perpetrate against them. It's like the father who says "my old man was harsh, but I was a little sh.., he did what he needed to do", who takes this attitude into blaming his children for the harsh parenting he uses against them. Of course, it's not just the meaning the adult makes out of his own painful childhood experiences that sets him up to blame those who experience his harm. His victim stance thinking is also a product of entitlement: blaming women is something he is expected, as a man, to do.

People who experience chronic shame due to a trauma background will try very hard to avoid feeling it. Of course, shame can also be experienced when one's behaviour contradicts deeply held values or cherished aspects of identity ("I can't control myself, I beat women, I am a monster."). Whether it be chronic shame or the more acute shame that might occur as a result of their harmful behaviour, the identity of being a 'full man' 'protects' him from it.

If I was man enough then, I would have stopped him. He would not have done what he did to us, to me, to my sisters.

Yes, I was a boy. But a boy needs to be a man in moments like that. Not a sis. Not running to the bedroom with his tail between his legs.

Responses to traumatic experiencing, and the meaning made out of it, can be gendered to a degree. Boys who experience domestic and family violence, and/or sexual abuse, can experience this as a major threat to their sense of developing masculinity. They might find it hard to feel like a 'real man' if they believe that a 'real man' would have somehow been able to stop the abuse. Of course, these types of experiences are deeply humiliating and degrading, 'but' there is a particular thread to the humiliation that some boys experience. A humiliation to their developing masculine identity where they inherently feel 'less of a man', and subsequently struggle into their young adulthood and later years to restore a sense of being a 'full man' and to avoid impending humiliation.

If I was a full man, I would have confronted my Mum. She was never there to protect me. Women are weak, indecisive.

My mates were right back then. My new mates are right now. You can't trust them. Sleeping around. Manipulating us, going behind our backs. At least us men, we fight it out.

I learnt my lessons early, what you need to do to survive.

Sexist attitudes and misogynist structures and systems can influence the meaning that boys make out of their traumatic experiences. It's not uncommon therefore for boys who experience violence and abuse from their father to blame their mother. Our society still often blames mothers for 'not protecting' children rather than holding responsible the father or other adult causing harm.

And children often do not get to see or understand the full range of controlling and entrapment tactics used by the father against their mother, and how this can severely limit her options and safe choices. Fathers are often able to manipulate family law and other systems to pathologise their ex-partner – it's still not uncommon for violent and abusive men to win majority or full custody of their children.

The boy's hostility towards (or at least, distrust of) his mother can be reinforced by the sexist attitudes of male peer groups, resulting in highly problematic and harmful gendered beliefs into young adulthood and beyond. Beliefs that women cannot be trusted.

Some boys and young men are of course also influenced by a sense of collective grievance pipelined through the 'manosphere'. A grievance that it is now 'women who pull all the strings', and who are denying men the opportunity to be 'full men'. Masculinity threat becomes amplified through this sense of collective grievance, of women taking away a masculinity that men are entitled to by virtue of their biological sex.

Attempts to restore a sense of being 'a full man', and the practices of male supremacy, can become a heavy investment. The young man's use of coercive control becomes a way to protect himself from the humiliation of 'being made' to feel less of a man, and from chronic shame. He learns that being a 'full man' is to expect that he can extract sexual and other benefits from his partner, and that he can punish her for 'causing' him to feel humiliation.

How dare you make me less of a man.

So what if my skin isn't exactly white. Or if I can't get a stable job or a deposit on a house. I can still be a full man, just as much as any other man, can't I?

I can, I must, I have to, what am I if I'm not? A girl?

The quest to be a 'full man' is not a level playing field. Some men have substantially more privilege levers than others. Men who lack white, able-bodied and/or cisgender privilege might still feel that they should succeed as a 'full man', but in reality the odds are stacked up against them. Rather than focus on the structural and systemic causes of socio-political, economic and other forms of marginalisation and disadvantage, influencers manipulate fear, bigotry and sexism to scapegoat immigrants, women and 'elites'.

The experience of humiliation and structural violence due to oppressive social conditions and power structures becomes further fuel to reclaim a 'lost masculinity'. In a world seen in black-and-white terms, the alternative (to be like a woman) is unconscionable.

You make me shake with anger. You make my insides collapse.

You don't know the half of what I do to manage this, to manage you. I need to make you feel crazy. To stop those idiots from egging you on. How else do I disarm you?

And you blame me for exploding when everything I try doesn't work and you still challenge me!

For those men who use violence with a trauma background, the somatic disruption experienced when feeling 'triggered' can be quite intense. However, they still choose to give themselves the green light to use violence, via the meaning they make of their partner's actions. The choice is made in the moment, like many times before, to cause fear, terror, humiliation, psychological injury or degradation to control her behaviour. He might lack distress tolerance and emotional regulation skills to a degree – but he gives himself permission to not use the skills he has.

He also makes more upstream choices to 'manage her' that form patterns of coercive control. To stop her from doing things that 'threaten his masculinity', whether that be expressing her intelligence about something (that he takes as being made to feel wronged), spending time with male friends, dressing up for others, not following a rule he has set, or attempting to call him out for his harmful attitudes and behaviours. He can't tolerate her being 'right' and him being 'wrong', in his black-and-white worldview. He won't accept being challenged for his harmful and entitlement-based behaviour, blaming her for 'making' him feel humiliation.

I'm hurt. Don't you care? Why do you twist the knife?

I survive through you I whisper inside, and cry out loud to your mother heart.

Men who use violence with a complex trauma background can experience intense psychological pain. They can also use emotional displays strategically to entrap their partner into taking care of him emotionally. Living their emotional world through their partner, rather than maturing as an emotional adult, is an entitlement our society offers to men in general, not only to those who use violence. An entitlement that results in his partner becoming heavily objectified, an object to restore his sense of being a full man, and to restore a parental attachment he might not have had securely as a child.

Why does he so desperately want the relationship to continue, if he sees her as a threat, and as constantly 'wronging him'? On his own, he would no longer have her to live his emotional life for him. He would have to face what he currently avoids facing through controlling her. He would no longer be able to force the emotional and other benefits he extracts from her.

You think you can see through me. You think you can call me out. You seemed to be different – no, you're just like all the other women controllers in the world. Backing us into a corner. Getting all the big wigs on your side.

No more! I'm getting back what's mine, what's been taken away from me.

How dare you make me feel less of a man.

Men who perpetrate violence with a trauma background can experience what has been termed shame anxiety. The experience of shame can be so intense, that they will actively attempt to avoid situations or events where they might feel it. This can be compounded by an underlying sense of masculinity threat, of needing frequent reassurance that they are a 'full man' so as to avoid feelings of humiliation.

When his partner does something that taps into his anxiety about experiencing shame or humiliation, he can feel a very deep sense of injustice. It might be that she stands up to him. That she doesn't accompany him to a cultural event and he feels 'humiliated' having to attend without his wife. Through his entitlement-focused worldview, he feels that he has been 'wronged'. He feels justified using controlling and violent behaviours to prevent her from repeating this 'injustice', from 'making him' feel shame and/or humiliation.

When anxiety is intense, the person experiencing it often wants to make 100% sure that the event or situation they fear will never happen. This is how anxiety can be so self-reinforcing. Absolute assurance is impossible, yet because reassurance seeking can result in a temporary reduction in anxiety ("phew, I've made sure that it can't happen for now"), the fruitless search for 100% sureness can be 'addictive'. The anxiety alleviation is only temporary, as it is only a matter of time before a new or repeat situation arises that evokes the anxiety.

Men who cause violent harm often not only feel driven to avoid shame and humiliation, they feel entitled to use violent and controlling behaviour to seek this reassurance. To control their partner's actions so that she does not threaten his masculinity, nor 'bring him close' to his well of underlying shame.

When a victim-survivor attempts to increase her resistance to his violence, such as by trying to push back against his rules and fence-wires so that she has more moments of being herself rather this his object, risk can increase. Not only might be experience humiliation and shame more frequently. He might also come to believe this his partner has taken something big away from him that he feels entitled to make her restore.

He might blame her for having less access to their children (e.g., due to a protection order). For having suicidal thoughts and for his mental health spiralling down (that's of course not her responsibility). For losing status and privilege if systems and his community start to treat him differently after becoming identified as a perpetrator of violence. In some situations, this blame can build into an intense grievance, that the victim-survivor has taken away something big and enduring that he feels entitled to.

Turning this around can be a long process. There are many interlocking pieces, and change can be approached in different ways.

The combination of entitlement and trauma varies amongst men who perpetrate violence. For some men, the trauma is very large in their pathways into using violence… but the entitlement is even larger. For others, the entitlement might not be as substantial. However, it's rarely *just* trauma when adult men use DFSV. Addressing the trauma alone can be counterproductive (and make things worse). Whereas not uncommonly, it *is* just entitlement with little or no trauma – sometimes it is sufficient to 'just' focus on entitlement-based beliefs and behaviour.